

You Come Too

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/44321635) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/44321635>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Young Royals (TV 2021)
Relationships:	Simon Eriksson/Wilhelm , Simon Eriksson & Marcus
Characters:	Simon Eriksson , Wilhelm (Young Royals) , Marcus (Young Royals) , Ayub (Young Royals) , Rosh (Young Royals) , Felice Ehrencrona , Sara Eriksson , Linda (Young Royals) , Malin (Young Royals) , Henry (Young Royals) , Walter (Young Royals) , Alexander Bragé , August (Young Royals) , Kristina (Young Royals) , Jan-Olof (Young Royals) , Micke Eriksson , Erik (Young Royals) , Nils (Young Royals) , Vincent (Young Royals)
Additional Tags:	POV Alternating , Canon Compliant , Post-Canon , Consensual Underage Sex , Fluff and Angst , Angst with a Happy Ending , POV Wilhelm (Young Royals) , Love , Idiots in Love , no more secrets , Boys In Love , Boys Kissing , Mutual Pining , Sweater Sniffing , The Fishes Have Names , Except When Marcus Asks , Sharing a Bed , Emotions , Communication , In this together , Endgame , Erik is still dead , POV Simon (Young Royals) , Marcus Hate Club , Anxiety , Anxiety Attacks , Implied/Referenced Underage Sex , Unlabeled Wilhelm (Young Royals) , Hillerska Boarding School (Young Royals)
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-01-16 Updated: 2023-03-13 Words: 25,633 Chapters: 5/?

You Come Too

by [escapethrustory](#)

Summary

He wasn't sure how he and Simon had gotten from their fight in the locker room to that kiss last night, but he honestly couldn't wait to talk to Simon and find out what was next. He hoped them kissing each other meant that they could have a fresh start — that they would figure things out together.

Or, a re-telling of Simon and Wille's reconnection post Wille's denial and Simon's rebound attempt with Marcus.

The story starts with the events of the Valentine Ball. There will be POV switches between Wille and Simon, and there will be a lot of exploration of each of their internal worlds and feelings. Eventually this will diverge from canon in consideration of where Wille's speech at the Jubilee Celebration leaves them, but mostly I hope to fill in the processing and emotion that drove both characters in S2. There will be some angst, but it will be there to help propel each of their healing journeys — as individuals, and as a couple. And there will also be fluff and light smut to balance out the heavier aspects of this story. *The tags and rating may be adjusted as we go along.

Notes

Hello! This is my first fanfic. Admittedly, this type of writing isn't my comfort zone; however, Young Royals and Wilmon have had such a tight grip on me, and I'd like to explore that creatively. I'll be writing this as we go along, so I'm not sure how long it will take me between updates, but I think publishing this first chapter will help keep me accountable for sharing it in the first place, and for writing more. I've spent the past few months reading so many fics here, and I continue to be impressed by everyone's creativity and writing prowess. It's a bit scary to contribute my story, but I hope people enjoy it! Please feel free to give me constructive feedback and/or come talk with me on socials — @escapethrustory on both Twitter & Tumblr.

Thank you so much to Rose, Flavia, and Jen for being my first readers for the chapter; I truly appreciate your feedback and encouragement.

Chapter 1

Wille's POV

Wille blindly groped around his desk for his phone so he could snooze his alarm. He really needed to process what had happened last night. Despite the early hour, he (for maybe the first time in more than a month), was looking forward to attending classes. Attending classes meant he'd see Simon.

Simon had kissed him last night — really kissed him. Just when he had left the ball because he had decided to let Simon be happy with Marcus, Simon came outside to find him and kissed him passionately, with so much want and heat. It had felt like Wille could finally breathe again.

Before last night's kiss, Wille had started to accept that he would never get to have Simon that way again. He had even started to wish that he could forget what it felt like, because maybe then he would feel less tortured when he saw Simon—or his lips. He regretted a lot of what had happened with Simon, but probably most of all he regretted that when Simon had kissed him that day in his room before he left to go to the palace for that dreadful interview, he didn't know that it would be their last kiss for months (or possibly ever)... If he had known, he would have taken more time to enjoy it and deepened the kiss from a chaste peck to one that was more passionate. In hindsight, he hadn't kissed Simon nearly enough while he had the chance. After their first kiss, Wille had stupidly said that they should forget about it, but the irony was that the kisses he shared with Simon were anything but forgettable. They made his whole body shiver with anticipation. Simon's kisses made everything in his world brighter, and he hated that he wasted any time he could have spent doing that. He regretted that he ever pushed Simon away and tried to deny that he was "like that."

Wille first left the ball before the performance, but Simon had followed him outside and exasperatedly told him, "I'm just trying to move on..." and then he stepped painfully close to Wille and said, "Everything just went wrong between us..." Wille hadn't been able to ignore the fact that Simon was trying to move on; he had already seen for himself that Simon was singing on karaoke dates, flirting through text messages, kissing after rowing competitions, and now dancing at school balls. The truth is he hadn't been able to think about much else, let alone not see it. Wille had felt left behind — still stuck inside the memories of his and Simon's brief time together. So, yeah, he definitely knew that Simon was "just trying to move on," but what he didn't know is why Simon had sought him out again when he had already told him to be happy with Marcus.

It was like time stood still and Wille's brain stopped working when Simon started to lean in and paused there mere inches from his face. Wille had let Simon take the lead in the kiss. Wille wouldn't dream of initiating a kiss with him — as much as he had wanted to every time they'd breathed the same air. When Simon stepped closer, Wille had resisted the urge to kiss him — even though every muscle and fiber of his being itched to press his lips on Simon's. In a way, it reminded him of their first kiss. When Wille had needed a moment to breathe — a moment to slow down before he could decide to kiss Simon back — Simon had given it to

him. They had rested there with their foreheads against one another until Wille could gather the resolve to join his lips with Simon's. Last night Wille had given Simon that same moment to breathe and collect himself so that he could decide whether they would kiss or not. The smell of his citrus shampoo flooded Wille's nose when Simon stood that close, and Wille had wanted to nuzzle into those soft curls and breathe everything in the way he had in his dreams nearly every night.

But thank the gods — thank everyone — that Simon had kissed him after all. Wille had just left the ball believing that everything between Simon and him was finished once and for all. Wille loved him and wanted to be with him, but he had decided to let him go — thinking that it was what was best for Simon, and that it was what he wanted. If Simon wanted to move on, Wille didn't want to hold him back — especially when he couldn't offer the same things that Marcus could. As much as Wille wanted to be with Simon, he knew that he had hurt him and still couldn't come out the way that he would need to love Simon out in the open.

He knew that they had reached an impasse in their time together. As much as seeing Simon with Marcus had hurt, he could finally see that he gave him something that Wille couldn't. It's not that he didn't want to — of course he did. He wasn't ashamed of Simon or being with him. If he could live a damn normal life and not have whole teams of people deciding every choice down to his wardrobe, he would. Wille could see now that him asking Simon to wait for him and settle for only having him behind closed doors was so unfair to Simon. Simon was joy personified, and joy shouldn't be restricted and contained. Seeing Simon across that dance floor with Marcus, Wille saw that he had found someone who made him smile — and everyone else could see it too. That was the point... That was the moment he knew for sure that he had missed his chance; Simon had moved on.

Wille stepped into the shower as he thought about the sinking feeling he had in his gut when he walked outside last night. He had just told Simon that he knew Simon didn't love him anymore and that he wouldn't bother him anymore. Telling Simon that his boyfriend seemed nice was like swallowing glass, but he couldn't let Simon know how much it hurt to see him with someone else when he knew it was his own actions that had set that in motion. He hadn't understood how Simon had possibly moved on that quickly, but when Simon had admitted that having space from him had been good and that Marcus gave him support that Wille didn't, he knew that Simon didn't want him anymore.

Wille had never been happier to be wrong... He didn't know what it all meant yet, but it had to mean something. Simon wouldn't just kiss him, right — not when things with Marcus seemed to be progressing?? He wasn't sure how he and Simon had gotten from their fight in the locker room to that kiss last night, but he honestly couldn't wait to talk to Simon and find out what was next. He hoped that them kissing each other meant that they could have a fresh start — that they would figure things out together. Maybe “trying to” move on and *actually* moving on were two different things...

Wille couldn't help but smile broadly as he thought about what it felt like when their lips connected. By the end of it, he felt like his body had floated right off the ground. It had been like the love that he couldn't show Simon had locked itself up inside him and sunk like a heavy weight inside his body. It took effort to walk around with that everyday, but kissing Simon had lifted that weight right off him.

Wille smiled just thinking about Simon's shuddering breath that floated between them as they kissed and slotted together like two halves of the same puzzle. He was in a hot shower, but right now his insides felt warm and syrupy thinking about Simon's kisses and the dazzling smile he flashed at him when they broke apart. Simon had come back to him last night, and Simon's brighter-than-the-sun smile beamed straight at Wille when he performed his solo with the choir. Wille was so proud of Simon for writing that song, and he had never heard Simon sound better. Simon's performance knocked the wind out of him and gave him head-to-toe goosebumps.

Wille had no intention of walking away if Simon still wanted him. Living without him had hurt so bad; it really had felt like he would die from having half his heart ripped out of his body and the air snatched from his lungs. If Simon would stand by his side, he would need to find a way to make room for Simon to be his whole self — not some half-hidden version of himself that was tame enough or acceptable enough for the rest of the world. Wille loved Simon; he loved their love, and he was tired of feeling like any of that had to be hidden or apologized for. *They hadn't done anything wrong*, and if they had found their way back to each other, then this time he was going to fight for them. They're in it together—for as long as Simon will have him. His mama and the royal court would just have to figure it out. If he could have Simon, he would find a way to be the Crown Prince they needed him to be. Having Simon's support and love would mean everything.

Wille squared his shoulders as he walked into the dining room for breakfast and decided to make Simon a sandwich just like the one he made him the morning after Simon rescued him from the football field. Simon takes care of so many people, but Wille wanted to take care of Simon. Simon had to catch the bus to Hillerska so early every morning that Wille knew he didn't always have time to eat. Wille wasn't always so great about eating himself – mostly due to the stress that had been weighing on him – but he could make sure that Simon ate.

“Good morning,” Wille said to Walter, Henry, and Alexander as he sat down at the table. “Have fun last night?” he asked Alexander as he sipped some coffee. “Alexander??”

Alexander stood up without answering and left the room.

Wille felt his eyes widen in confusion, and he shook his head no at Walter and Henry as they made a face and silently asked him what was up with Alexander. Before he could say anything, his phone chimed with a text message from Jan-Olaf.

Jan Olaf: Good morning, Crown Prince. The speech is attached. Start practicing. Don't forget the tailor will be coming today.

Wille sighed deeply and snapped his phone shut, biting his thumbnail out of old habit. He knew that the Jubilee speech was looming, but he couldn't help but feel like it was awful timing that he couldn't even go one day figuring things out with Simon before the damn Royal Court and royal duties were mucking everything up again.

He would have to think about that later; Simon is more important.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Simon quickly followed behind him and saw the look of confusion on Wille's face.

Stepping forward with his arm gesturing widely, Simon exasperatedly said, "I'm just trying to move on..."

Wille swallowed thickly and replied, "I can see that," defeated.

Simon sighed deeply and took a big step closer to Wille, wanting him to understand. "Everything just went wrong between us," Simon started.

"I know," Wille confirmed, his eyes darting to Simon's lips.

Chapter Notes

I'm so excited to share Chapter 2 - my first chapter with Simon's POV - with you! I wrote it all yesterday because I was really looking forward to exploring Simon's POV of the Valentine's ball since we get less of his perspective in the show. Huge thanks to Kim (@nonbinarywille) for being my beta reader for this chapter. She gave me so much helpful feedback on this chapter and some of the changes that were made after the first draft. <3

Otherwise, I wanted to share a poem with you. The last line of the poem was used as the title for this fic because it really reminds me of Wilmon and the love they have for each other. Rilke has always been one of my favorite poets. In particular, Rilke - a German poet - writes a lot about love and the importance of retaining one's own personality/individuality/solitude. I really like that balance in relationships and feel like Wilmon as a couple really reflects that. They're so different and come from different worlds, but they're not trying to change one another. OK - here's the short poem (translated from the original German):

Pathways
by Rainer Maria Rilke

Understand, I'll slip quietly
away from the noisy crowd
when I see the pale
stars rising, blooming, over the oaks.

I'll pursue solitary pathways
through the pale twilit meadows,

with only this one dream:
You come too.

Simon's POV

Simon was listening to one of his new playlists, desperately trying to tune out the world and quiet his thoughts before he had to get ready for tonight's ball. He was looking forward to performing the song he wrote, but he wasn't looking forward to doing it in front of Wille. In truth, he felt pretty stupid and vulnerable sharing his innermost thoughts with Wille after learning Wille had just hooked up with Felice a few days ago.

Simon had walked out of the dining room before he heard any other details about Wille's hookup. Picturing Felice and Wille in Wille's bed making out was enough to make Simon want to scream. Simon remembered all too well what it was like to lay in that same bed and kiss Wille. Wille's kisses made Simon's entire body prickle with electricity. Maybe it wasn't fair of Simon to be angry about it since he'd been kissing Marcus, but Simon hadn't been kissing him in the bed where he and Wille had explored each other's bodies and whispered sweet confessions in each other's ears... Did Wille have to do it there of all places?? The boys of Forest Ridge pounding on the table and chanting in celebration of Wille's hookup only reminded Simon that he didn't get to have that. It was just another reminder that Simon didn't fit in — that what he and Wille did together didn't get celebrated — or claimed.

Simon could see how Wille would justify him kissing Felice by bringing up Marcus, but Wille didn't know that Simon still didn't even know how much he liked Marcus. He was trying so hard just to move on from his feelings about Wille that he still didn't know if he felt more than friendship for Marcus. The kisses still didn't feel natural, if he was truly honest, and they didn't make his stomach flip or make his heart race. They were just kisses — nothing memorable. But he couldn't tell Wille that kissing Marcus felt wrong...that they only made him want to kiss Wille again so he could feel something. Marcus' kisses made him go numb and detach — like he was watching his body from outside himself. He never meant for Wille to see him kiss Marcus — if he had it his way, he wouldn't have told him about Marcus at all... or at least not until he knew it was going somewhere real. It felt nice that Marcus wanted to be seen in public with Simon, but it just reminded him that he'd rather be on dates with Wille.

Truthfully, all of these sounded like reasons he should end things with Marcus as soon as possible. It wasn't fair to keep Marcus waiting around for Simon to feel more toward him. Simon really didn't feel like time was going to change any of it, but Marcus had insisted he wanted to wait and had clouded Simon's mind with all this crap about Micke and Wille. It wasn't until Simon got home from talking with Marcus that he realized Marcus hadn't listened to him. Simon hadn't told Marcus about Micke, or even Wille, for that matter. Shouldn't Marcus ask *him* what had happened or what he wanted? He really didn't like it when people listened to gossip — especially gossip about him that wasn't even true.

Everyone had been encouraging him to be with Marcus. In theory, he thought he should too, but it just didn't feel right.

Simon watched the fish swim back and forth across the tank. Every time he saw them he was reminded of his night here with Wille when he made up those ridiculous names for the fishes because Wille had asked. Wille made even the smallest things about his life feel interesting. He'd never had someone want to know so much about him before, and it was an addictive feeling — being appreciated like that. It made him feel seen.

Simon was jolted out of his reverie by four light knocks on his bedroom door.

“Mama I told you; I don't want to go. I don't sing until 10.”

But it was Marcus standing in his doorway — not his mama. He had to admit, Marcus looked handsome in his black suit — even if he did look a little bit like a waiter.

“I didn't think balls were your thing?”

Marcus stretched out his arm, offering Simon his hand to stand up. “Anything for you.”

Simon smiled and placed his hand on Marcus' to stand.

“Shouldn't you be in costume?” Marcus asked, placing his hands on Simon's shoulders.

“Yes...or, no. When the choir performs we usually wear our uniforms. It's cool of you to come,” Simon said walking toward the door where his uniform was hanging.

“Of course,” Marcus said, taking a seat on the edge of his bed.

Simon turned around as he pulled off his shirt, feeling a bit awkward changing in front of Marcus.

“I didn't know you had pets. What are their names?”

Simon stilled and tried to keep his face from reacting. Of course, he's asking about the dang fishes, he stalled. “They don't have names,” he replied. If he wanted to keep the names of the fishes between him and Wille, that was his right. And he did; that night meant too much to him.

Simon hadn't been expecting Marcus to come to the ball after all, but maybe it wouldn't hurt to try one more time to find a spark with Marcus. And if it got Wille's attention in the process, then that was a bonus. Maybe Wille would realize that he and Simon could attend things like this together...if he would fight for them.

Simon sipped his glass of punch and took a seat next to Marcus. They'd just stepped off the dance floor because Marcus wanted a break. Simon had wanted to stay out there, where he could keep an eye on Wille, but he couldn't exactly tell Marcus that. Or, he could, but the night would probably be over.

Simon still had to get through his performance, so he should probably avoid confessions before then.

As the minutes until the performance ticked by, Simon was getting a bit more anxious. Performances generally didn't make him nervous, but baring his soul in front of the whole school did — especially when one of those people was Wille. Simon's eyes darted around the room, and he only half-heard Marcus saying something to him about leaving after his performance.

"I was thinking, you can stay at my place if you want to, that is."

"Okay," Simon nodded before his brain processed what Marcus was asking.

"Okay?"

Simon shook his head and replied, "mhm," even though he wasn't sure he wanted to do that. Staying over was probably a really bad idea, actually. But they'd have to talk about that again later.

Marcus pulled Simon's chin toward him and kissed him with a smile lifting at the corners of his mouth.

Simon looked around, hoping Wille hadn't seen them like last time after the rowing competition.

"Do you want to get some dessert? Hillerska always goes overboard on stuff like this; we should take advantage."

"Sure, that sounds good. I'm still too hot to go dancing again."

"Do you like those?" Simon asked as Marcus reached for some French macarons. Just then out of the corner of his eye, Simon saw Wille approaching the dessert table.

This should be awkward as hell, Simon cringed inwardly.

"Hello," Marcus said.

"Hey," Wille returned.

"Crown Prince..." Marcus supplied.

"Oh, Wille. Please. It's cool."

Simon could only gape back at Wille, wanting to disappear into himself. What were the three of them going to talk about?

"Damn smart move dressing up as a waiter," Wille said to Marcus, without any hint of judgment. "This wig hurts like hell."

"It might not really be my style," Marcus chuckled.

“What? Poofy pants and cravats? They’re not your thing?”

“Not really.”

Simon stood there watching the exchange, his eyes darting between them. Were they really going to make small talk about costumes?

“How’s it going at the shooting range?” Wille asked further.

OK; they’re really doing this. Simon was getting more uncomfortable as the conversation continued. Had they already gotten to the cordial exes part of the program?

“Fewer people shoot in the winter, though. You should come and shoot again,” Marcus was in the middle of saying.

“Sure. Why don’t you tag along?” Wille said, looking at Simon expectantly.

Really??

Simon wanted to laugh right in his face. Shooting wasn’t his thing, and Wille knew that. “It’s not really my thing,” Simon emphasized out loud instead, as he looked back and forth between them.

This time they all stood there awkwardly with expressions that reflected how Simon was feeling internally.

Wille smiled uncomfortably at Simon, nodding his head before he broke the ice again to politely ask Marcus to pass him a spoon. *This was torture*. He was being punished for juggling the attention of two guys who couldn’t be more different. Message received universe.

“Come join us for a dance later,” Wille tried one more time, but Simon couldn’t find his voice.

“Sure,” Marcus replied for him as they both started to move away from the table. Simon had lost his appetite for sweets.

“Nice. See you later then,” Wille smiled.

“Yes, see you,” Marcus offered.

Simon swallowed thickly and loosened his tie.

Marcus leaned in and whispered, “He seems really nice. Not at all stuck up like when he was shooting with Felice.”

Simon willed his head to nod because he still hadn’t found his voice. What the hell was that, he thought to himself.

“I have to use the restroom,” Marcus told him, handing Simon his drink.

Simon felt like there was no air in the room. He felt hot and tired all of a sudden like he had run a marathon. The thumping bass was making his head pound, and Simon could hear the blood rushing in his ears. He felt a bit nauseous.

Why was Wille acting that way, Simon kept asking himself. The last time Simon saw Wille he was spitting mad in the locker room admonishing him for his “secret boyfriend.” Marcus wasn’t his boyfriend nor a secret, but that’s beside the point. How did they get from that to making small talk around the dessert table?

Simon turned on his heel to find Wille again because everything about that conversation felt wrong. He nearly collided right with Wille as he walked through the doorway.

“What was that?”

“What was what,” Wille asked, shaking his head in confusion.

Nodding back toward the dessert table, Simon replied “I just thought it felt weird...” as he looked down, suddenly feeling really vulnerable acknowledging that he was uncomfortable.

“I’m just trying to be polite,” Wille offered. Wille sighed and said, “I...I get it.”

Get what? Simon replied internally, his eyes searching Wille’s eyes trying to understand.

“You don’t love me anymore; I’ll leave you alone. Your boyfriend seems really nice” Wille had said, already moving past him before Simon could even process what he said.

Simon spun around, his eyes following Wille to the door as he left the building.

As he heard the door shut behind Wille, Simon stopped in his tracks. He felt like he’d just been doused in a bucket of cold water. His stomach dropped out his feet through the floor, and he felt a cold chill move down his spine. What the hell had just happened? This wasn’t at all how things were supposed to go... Simon’s mind was spinning.

Marcus approached him and thanked him for holding his drink. Simon tried to focus his eyes and smile, but everything around him seemed distorted right now.

Marcus asked, “Something wrong?”

Simon shook his head no and forced a smile, his eyes downcast as they clinked their glasses and took sips of their punch.

What were they toasting? The spectacular obliteration of Simon’s heart right there in the middle of the Valentine’s Ball? God; he was a gay hot mess!

Simon was reeling, still trying to process Wille’s words one word at a time.

Wille doesn’t think Simon loves him anymore... he had never said the words to him, but had he needed to? Of course, Simon loved him. He had introduced him to his best friends and given him multiple chances even though Wille kept changing his mind. He had ridden his bike in the middle of the night to drag his wasted ass off the frozen football field and slept at

the foot of his bed to make sure he was OK through the night. They'd had sex — more than once — and Wille had met his mama. Simon was completely gone for that boy, and he thought everyone knew it.

Everyone except for Wille? How could he think Simon didn't love him anymore when Simon felt like he'd been pleading with him to choose him back? Simon just wanted to be chosen. It was one thing to tell Simon behind closed doors that he wanted to be with him, but it was a different thing to be with Simon for everyone else to see.

Simon didn't want Wille to leave him alone; he wanted him to stay with him always. *Didn't he know that?*

Wille thought Marcus was his boyfriend, and Simon had no one to blame but himself. He hadn't told Wille otherwise. He had shrugged his shoulders and completely side-stepped his question about whether they were a couple now. Simon had taken the gamble of letting him think they were. How could he tell him the truth? How could he say, 'No; we're not a couple because I'm still waiting for you to choose me'?

It seems everyone wants him to be with Marcus — even Wille now.

No. —

This wasn't at all how he had wanted this night to go. He didn't want to be here trying to make Wille jealous of Marcus. He wanted to be here with Wille — kissing and dancing with *him*. Wille must not want that if he wouldn't even fight for them to have it. Instead, he was here giving Simon his blessing to be with Marcus. *Fuck*. How did he get here?

Simon's life would be so much easier if he could fall in love with Marcus — if he could be happy with the guy that wanted to be with him in public.

Simon felt like he was underwater as he and Marcus walked through the crowded room and moved next to the window sill. Simon looked around the room trying to see if Wille had come back inside. Simon wanted to know where he was. It would be time for him to sing soon, and what was the point if Wille wasn't even going to be here to hear it?

All Simon could hear was the lyrics of whichever song was playing through the speakers right now.

"From your love, never let me go, never let me go don't go. From your love, never let me go, don't go."

"Are you nervous?"

"For what?"

"For the performance?"

"No...maybe a little"

“From your love, never let me go, never let me go don’t go. From your love, never let me go, don’t go.”

Never let me go, Wille.

“I gotta go check something with the choir,” Simon said, handing his drink to Marcus.

Simon walked through the crowd and moved towards the exit he had seen Wille take earlier. Simon needed to clear things up...*now*.

Simon exited the building and started walking down the path. He thought he could see Wille just a bit further down the path. Who could miss that wig — even from a distance — and that baby blue hideous coat?

His heart was in his throat as he sped up his pace and called out, “Wille!”

Wille looked over his shoulder but kept walking down the stairs.

Simon quickly followed behind him and saw the look of confusion on Wille’s face.

Stepping forward with his arm gesturing widely, Simon exasperatedly said, “I’m just trying to move on...”

Wille swallowed thickly and replied, “I can see that,” defeated.

Simon sighed deeply and took a big step closer to Wille, wanting him to understand. “Everything just went wrong between us,” Simon started.

“I know,” Wille confirmed, his eyes darting to Simon’s lips.

Simon took a breath and leaned in, closing his eyes as his forehead rested against Wille’s.

Simon needed a second. He needed Wille to understand, and Simon needed to catch his breath.

As they paused, resting there against each other, Simon felt his heart speed up and an undeniable urge to kiss Wille. Their noses touched, and Simon knew this was the moment of no return. Any wall that he had built up between them was about to topple over; it just needed one small push.

As Simon’s lips slotted against Wille’s, that wall came down. Kissing Wille was natural; it was instinctual. It was as unconscious as breathing, and Simon doesn’t know how he went this long without doing it.

Simon broke the kiss and pulled back slightly because he needed to make sure Wille was with him. Wille looked slightly dazed but so content. Simon couldn’t help but smile at the boy that he loved, understanding even without words that Wille wanted this; he wanted him. Wille mirrored his smile, and Simon couldn’t resist going back for more kisses as he gripped Wille’s neck and pulled him closer. Simon’s hand brushed Wille’s jaw and Wille mirrored him again — them each needing to get their hands on each other and revel in this embrace.

This was right. Simon may have tried to move on, but it had only brought him right back to Wille.

“Simon!” Marcus yelled, calling out into the dark.

Simon and Wille broke apart reluctantly, with Simon gasping, “The choir!”

Shit. What am I doing?

Simon hurried up the path toward Marcus.

“They’re starting,” Marcus exclaimed. “Where were you?”

“Getting some air,” Simon rushed. “Come on!”

Simon kept moving, not glancing back to see where Wille was. He entered the building and noticed that the choir was lined up waiting for him. With no time to be embarrassed or apologize, Simon found his mark.

He saw Wille move into the room and find a place directly in Simon’s eye-line. Smiling with their eyes, their gazes connected, and Simon felt everything else fall away. Simon found his voice.

The performance started with him as the only singer — the excitement clear in his voice, and his eyes sparkling as they connected with Wille’s. Simon always felt comfortable and confident on stage, but this was the first time that he was singing something that he wrote. Writing it had been a little like inviting visitors into his internal world, which Simon typically left well-guarded. Simon’s eyes moved across the room, as he briefly looked at Sara and Marcus behind her. Simon’s eyes shifted away, feeling less warmth reflected there.

Even though he had been worried about singing something this personal, he felt really good about the arrangement. Having the other voices in the choir join him a few lines into the verse also helped him feel supported, and he was proud to share the song that he and his teacher believed in.

“If you ask me about what stayed, the memories will never fade...” Simon’s eyes closed as he finished singing the verse, feeling his voice and any lingering nerves settle comfortably. His voice started the next verse even stronger, as he sang about the ways he and Wille had been tested.

He and Wille still had a lot to talk about, but if Wille was confused about what Simon wanted, he hoped the song he wrote for him would speak better than he ever could about just how much he felt for this boy and how much every moment they spent together would forever be in his heart. What they had couldn’t be rewritten, and Simon’s love for Wille would always endure. Simon poured every emotion and all of his love into his words as he sang directly to Wille; he hoped Wille could feel his love and would never doubt it again.

Simon’s eyes closed again as he sang the line, “I can’t forget all the good we’ve shared...the question’s answer is for sure, that ~~Hillarska~~ our love will endure,” his voice softening

tenderly, as he glanced back at Wille with determination.

When Simon finished, the room erupted in applause, and his gaze connected with Wille's again. Simon felt the whole room light up from Wille's smile, and he felt overwhelmed by the pride Wille reflected back at him. Their love was undeniable; nothing and no one could eclipse it, and Simon was tired of trying to...

That night as Simon climbed in his bed, he rolled over and tangled his fingers in the cashmere sweater under his pillow — Wille's cashmere sweater. Some of his scent still clung to it, and Simon breathed it in and felt a calm settle over him. He and Wille might not make sense to others, but to him, it's one of the few things that did. Simon knew that he and Wille still had a lot to talk about and settle between them, but Simon needed Wille to know that he still felt like there was something there to salvage. They weren't past the video yet, but Simon wanted to be. Even though Wille had read everything about Marcus all wrong, it meant a lot to Simon that Wille had tried for him. Wille loved him, and Simon knew that Wille wanted him to be happy. But now Wille needs to know that he is the one who makes Simon happy and that Simon isn't ready to give him up.


As for Marcus, tonight had also made it clear that things weren't right between them, and Simon was done forcing it.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Simon took a deep breath and steeled himself for the day ahead. He needed to figure some stuff out and not jump Wille the minute he saw him. First, he needed to talk to Sara for a reality check, because he didn't know if he could trust what he was feeling... if he and Wille were really in a different spot than they were before, or if it had all been a delusion of Simon's own making. Now that Simon's carefully built wall had come crumbling down, he needed help finding his way forward.

Chapter Notes

I'm back with a new chapter! I'm having a lot more fun writing this than I expected because it's so interesting to really get inside the mindset of the characters and plant seeds that will grow and connect later on in the story. I hope you like reading this type of exploration of the characters and the story, and I hope you'll also like some of the new details I added in this chapter to imagine some of the scenes we **didn't** see in the show. I expect to do a bit more of that in upcoming chapters. This chapter was also written from Simon's POV because that made the most sense to me, but we'll switch back to Wille for the next one. Please consider leaving kudos and/or comments about which parts you like best. That's really my favorite part! Or come find me on Twitter or Tumblr, because I'd love to chat with you about anything YR, honestly! Until then -- 

Simon's POV

Simon's fingers tangled in the soft, delicate fibers of Wille's sweater as he pressed it to his face and inhaled the scent that barely remained there. Simon felt nearly dizzy with want as Wille's scent pulled his memory back to their kisses last night. Their lips had slid together so naturally that it didn't feel like it had been months since the last time. Simon had been tired of fighting the magnetic pull he felt every time he was near Wille. He wanted to stay in that space where none of the outside voices could have a say; where it was just the sound of their heartbeats thumping together in time, filling the space in the charged air between them.

Simon took a deep breath and steeled himself for the day ahead. He needed to figure some stuff out and not jump Wille the minute he saw him. First, he needed to talk to Sara for a reality check, because he didn't know if he could trust what he was feeling... if he and Wille were really in a different spot than they were before, or if it had all been a delusion of Simon's own making. Now that Simon's carefully built wall had come crumbling down, he

needed help finding his way forward. He and Sara had drifted apart a bit more since she moved to Hillerska, but Simon knew that she was still the person he trusted to help him sort through the rubble and give it to him straight.

Simon's eyes darted around nervously as he approached Sara, checking to see if Marcus was lurking anywhere nearby.

"Hey," Sara cheerily called out to him.

"Hey," Simon quipped with more edge in his voice. "Have you seen Marcus?"

"No, I haven't seen him today."

"Good," Simon sighed, relieved.

"Is something wrong?"

"I kissed Wille at the ball," Simon confessed, not able to keep it to himself any longer.

"What? But your date was Marcus," Sara responded, confused, her eyebrows raising in surprise.

"Yeah..." Simon agreed, hanging his head and staring at his shoes.

"Why did you do it?" Sara asked.

"Because I'm a complete idiot," Simon huffed. "Because I really wanted to," he confessed more honestly, swallowing thickly. "I'm a horrible person."

"I *really* wanted it," he further admitted, not wanting to even pretend anymore that he didn't want Wille with every part of himself.

"But are you really a bad person because you did one bad thing?" Sara challenged.

Simon groaned in frustration, challenging Sara's acceptance right back. "You're supposed to tell me to forget Wille and be with Marcus."

"But you're not in love with Marcus," Sara replied softly, shrugging her shoulders.

Shots fired.

Simon deflated and looked at Sara with surprise, eyeing her cautiously.

"I mean...you can't control your feelings. Even if you have feelings for the wrong person, it can feel so damn right...so, I don't know. It's hard to explain."

Simon sighed and tried to process what Sara had said. He didn't expect Sara to support any part of him giving Wille another chance, which was why he had come to talk to her if he was

honest. He expected her to give him another rebuke for his tendency to give people too many chances and a reality check about the reasons Marcus was better for him.

Hearing Sara directly acknowledge that he was in love with Wille without judgment or reproach loosened something in Simon's chest. Sara saw that he and Wille worked together, and that meant *everything* to Simon right now.

"Come on. School is starting soon," Sara reminded him.

Simon turned and started walking toward the classroom buildings alongside Sara when his phone chimed with a new text message.

In case it was Wille, Simon stopped and unlocked the screen to read it.

Markus: Too bad you couldn't stay over last night.

Markus: Maybe this weekend? 😊

Simon's dread and guilt washed over him instantly as Marcus' persistence reminded him on nearly a daily basis that they weren't on the same page. Last night had proven that beyond a doubt since Simon had kissed Wille right in the middle of his "date" with Marcus. It had been nice of Marcus to go with him, but Simon had just felt drawn to Wille all night like a magnet. By now, he also knew that his feelings for Marcus were strictly platonic. Simon doesn't know if Marcus believed him last night when he said he'd been "getting some air" when he'd really been kissing Wille, but he does know things were super awkward when the ball finished. To get out of spending the night with him, he told Marcus that his mom had said he needed to stay at home since it was a school night. Marcus told him he understood, but he barely said a word to him on the drive home. Simon had also kissed him quickly on the cheek and bolted out of the car before Marcus' car had barely rolled to a stop outside his house because the last thing he wanted was for Marcus to kiss him again. He was honestly a bit surprised that Marcus was still texting him now like everything was great. Unintentionally, Simon knew he had given Marcus a few mixed signals, but Marcus didn't seem to be noticing any of them, or if he was, he was choosing to ignore them.

Shoving his phone back into his pocket, Simon hustled to catch back up with Sara. He couldn't deal with Marcus right now, but he knew he would have to soon.

Simon straightened his posture and listened attentively as Jan-Olaf from the Royal Court stood before the choir and gave them instructions about how to stand during the upcoming Jubilee Celebration for Hillerska. They would be directly behind the Crown Prince - behind Wille - as he gave his speech. It would be on television, and Simon couldn't even let himself think about what kind of opportunity this was for him to sing the song that he wrote in front of so many people. The Queen would be there, and the Prince Consort too. Simon couldn't even let his brain consider the implications of all of it. He just wanted to do his best and deliver a performance that he could be proud of...that Wille could be proud of, too.

“The Crown Prince will stand here, in front of you for the speech. Because you’ll be right behind him, I don’t want to see anything but your utmost attention on the speech. Go ahead -” Jan-Olaf said, handing it over to their choir leader.

“Thanks. Let’s start with the second verse: 1...2...3...”

Simon started singing the second verse of his song and felt his voice fill out the acoustics in the gymnasium. He closed his eyes and remembered how it had felt last night to have Wille’s eyes on him as he sang. Right then Simon felt held by the emotions and the memories this song evoked for him. Simon would have to ask Felice what she thought, but he thought his voice sounded even better today with these acoustics. His nerves had settled, and he was just enjoying the song itself because today it represented some healing and even hope for him; maybe this song wasn’t a goodbye anymore...maybe it was a new beginning.

Before he could finish that thought or even the final notes of the song, he watched as Jan-Olaf whispered something in the ear of his choir leader before he heard her say, “We’ve decided to sing the classic version of the Hillerska song at the Jubilee instead...”

“What for? The Headmistress thought this was great at the ball,” Simon scoffed incredulously.

“Sometimes last-minute adjustments have to be made,” the leader said sadly but resigned.

“We’ve been rehearsing for weeks...” reminded Simon.

“Since it’s the school’s 120th Anniversary, it’s important to keep to tradition. The traditional Hillis song symbolizes the school, ” Jan-Olaf bellowed.

“I thought we were going to show the school in a more modern light,” Simon retorted, hoping his choir leader would back him up here. After all, she’s the one who had encouraged him to work on the song, and she had told him to work hard all semester because this could open doors for him.

“Jan-Olaf is right, Hillerska has always stood for continuity and tradition,” she said insistently.

Well, forget that, then. Simon honestly felt betrayed. He thought she believed in him enough to fight harder. Why did everyone throw him under the bus without a second thought?

“We want to see a group performance, not a solo,” Jan Olaf added. “Her Majesty the Queen loves the original. It will be much appreciated.”

Simon had heard enough. He stepped down off the risers and grabbed his stuff on his way out of the gym. He was fuming. He should have known that the Royal Court wouldn’t let Simon have any kind of spotlight. Simon felt the bile rise in his throat as the opportunity slipped through his fingers. If the best thing that Simon had — his voice — wasn’t good enough for the Royal Court, how would he ever be good enough for the Crown Prince in their eyes? He felt small and powerless to get his life back on track.

Simon reached into his locker to get his books for class and saw Felice approaching him from the corner of his eye. She leaned against the lockers and sighed.

“Hey, I just wanted to say that your song is great. The choir leader thought so, and the Headmistress, too.”

“Jan-Olaf didn’t think so, and he fucked everything up,” Simon scoffed.

“The lyrics are so personal. They don’t want the solo and the speech on *The Year with the Royal Family*. It’s one of the most-watched television events in Sweden. They must not want to start up any more rumors about the two of you,” Felice explained.

Simon sighed. He hadn’t thought about it from that perspective, yet. But did it matter? He still felt like he was being swatted back in line and out of view.

Simon was trying to read silently, still stewing in his disappointment and anger over his song being cut from the Jubilee program. He could feel Wille’s concerned eyes on him. Wille had walked into class with such a bright smile on his face that it had taken the breath right out of Simon’s lungs, and his traitorous heart started hammering in his ears automatically. Simon knew it wasn’t Wille’s fault, but all that hope and possibility that Simon had felt last night and even this morning seemed out of reach, now. He didn’t know what to tell Wille; they still had so much that made everything so complicated for them. He wishes it was as simple as just dating the boy that he loves; maybe Simon doesn’t get simple in life.

“I made you a sandwich,” Wille said, pushing a napkin-wrapped sandwich across the desk toward him. It looked just like the one Wille had given him the morning after the football field, so Simon felt his heart clench.

“In case you didn’t have any time to eat breakfast...” Wille continued.

Wille could be so sweet and considerate sometimes that it made Simon's insides turn to goo, but even this gesture wasn't enough to temper the thoughts swirling in Simon's brain right now.

Simon barely looked up from his book, so he felt Wille deflate beside him.

“Don’t you want it?” Wille prodded.

Simon shook his head no because his voice had gotten stuck in his throat with his heart.

“Did something happen?” Wille continued, leaning over with obvious concern now.

Simon sighed and slouched further into his chair. “I need to finish this,” he insisted, not meeting Wille’s worried gaze.

Simon pushed the feelings down — refusing to let them all spill out in the middle of school.

Simon had rushed out of the classroom before Wille could grab him, and he had skipped lunch, opting instead to eat the sandwich Wille made in a corner of an empty classroom. Simon needed to cool off and think before he tried to talk to Wille because he really didn't know what to say. Simon wanted to work things out with him, and he knew Wille wanted to be with him but was it enough?

Simon headed toward the music room hoping that it would help him unwind and feel better, but as his fingers aimlessly played a tune, he felt his focus drifting to all things Wille and the Royal Court.

Right on cue, he saw Wille pause at the open door before moving into the room.

"Hey," Wille said softly, tentatively.

"What do you want?" Simon asked, still not feeling ready to do this.

"To see how you're doing. What happened?"

Whether he was ready or not, this was happening now. How he was doing and what he even wanted didn't seem to be the most relevant factors anymore...if they ever had been.

Simon sighed deeply and replied, "It feels like, when you enter the picture, everything I do turns into a problem."

"—But I...I thought that we, like...could start over after the ball, or...You...We kissed each other," Wille stammered.

"It's not about that," Simon tried to explain. "They're taking away the one good thing I love and that I'm good at. They're not letting me sing my song at the Jubilee. Jan-Olaf changed it back to the traditional school song. They don't want you associated with me," Simon said, looking pained toward Wille, "...as usual."

"Simon, that's not my fault."

"Wille...the song is about you."

Simon watched as understanding registered on Wille's face and he absorbed that information. He thought it had been clear last night that he was singing about Wille, but it turns out this mess of a boy that he loved wasn't very astute sometimes.

"But even if it wasn't about you, they probably still wouldn't want me to sing a solo. Felice said they probably don't want to kick the rumors about us back up again."

"Simon, I didn't... I didn't know—"

Simon sighed and moved away from the window. "How long do I have to be punished for the video?" he asked Wille.

Wille swallowed.

“You don’t understand. You haven’t suffered any consequences,” Simon connected, shuffling his feet across the floor.

“What? What the hell do you mean?” Wille asked, getting angrier.

“Okay, I get that it was rough for you for a while, but it feels like you’ve been pretending like nothing happened,” Simon returned, getting more frustrated.

“What the hell are you saying? You have no clue what I’ve been through. The person who posted it is to blame,” Wille implored, his voice getting louder.

“Yes—” Simon tried, not having much time to turn those thoughts over in his head.

“Not me,” Wille continued.

“That person got away with it while I got all the crap,” Simon acknowledged, feeling defeated and lowering his gaze.

He was so tired of this damn video and everything he had lost because of it. He was *still* losing things because of it... He could feel the tears starting to burn in his eyes, and he blinked them back.

“Simon, you...”

Simon swallowed thickly and felt the words that he didn’t want to say come out of his mouth anyway.

“Yesterday was a mistake. Okay?” Simon sighed and broke eye contact, moving toward the door and his bag. He couldn’t be here any longer if they were going to keep talking about everything he wanted but couldn’t have. He felt like Wille was just out of reach behind glass, but he kept getting stuck on the other side of it.

Wille stepped in front of his path after the pregnant pause exclaiming, “Simon you should be blaming August, not me.”

“What?” Simon asked, frozen in his tracks as confusion moved across his face and a chill went down his spine.

“Yeah,” Wille continued, taking a deep breath. He looked over his shoulder to the open door and then moved to close it behind him, sighing deeply.

Simon felt the charge in the air, sensing that something big was about to pop.

“It was... It was August who posted the video... But I... I removed him as prefect and captain of the rowing team. I tried —”

Simon felt like he’d been punched in the gut, his insides flinching.

“When did you find this out?” Simon implored.

Wille swallowed and couldn’t meet his eyes. Simon felt his muscles tense and the fury beginning to rise.

“You didn’t want to tell me??”

“Yes, Simon. Of course, I did... I was trying to protect you. I mean—”

“Come on. ‘Protect’ me?” Simon’s blood was now rushing in his ears, his pulse racing.

“You were protecting him. I could have reported him to the police,” Simon spit.

“Simon, you...” Wille swallowed, shaking his head. “You don’t get it. If you go to the police, August will have Sweden’s top lawyers. The royal family will have his back. They protect themselves. You don’t stand a chance against them,” Wille exclaimed with resignation.

Simon felt his face flush as the pieces clicked together.

“Against *you*—”

“What?”

“*You are the royal family.*”

“I am not like them,” Wille said, sounding more frustrated.

“You are EXACTLY like them! You’re exactly like your mama! You say you’re angry with her, but you act just like her,” Simon yelled, his voice harsh. “Keeping secrets and pretending like you’re protecting me, but you’re protecting yourself.”

Simon felt finished with today. Everything about this day had gone to shit, and the walls felt like they were closing in on him. He had to get out of there before he said anything else that they might never recover from. He moved to grab his bag and coat and walked out without another glance at Wille behind him. Simon needed to think.

“Simon. Simon, please, can we... Please, let’s just talk. Where are you going?” he heard Wille ask behind him, but Simon kept walking even as he heard a door slam behind him a few seconds later.

Simon felt every muscle in his body clench as he pulled out his phone to text Ayub as he sat down on the bus.

“Fucking August posted the video. And Wille knew but didn’t tell me.”

“What? For real?!”

Simon threw his head back and dropped his phone into his lap as the anger rolled through him again. What the fuck was he going to do now? His brain was spinning, but he couldn’t latch on to a single thought, because he just felt like the rug had been pulled out from

underneath him... again. How was he right back here with Wille? How had he made decisions without including Simon like before? It affected *both of them*. He had the same pit in his stomach that he had felt after Ayub read him the news alert that Wille had denied being in the video. How long had Wille kept this from him? Why tell him now? It didn't seem like Wille wanted to do anything else with the information. If he had, wouldn't he have done it already? How could Wille think that August losing his Prefect and Rowing Captain roles was enough of a punishment for recording and posting that video of them? August had committed *crimes*. August had destroyed their lives. *Of course, it was fucking August*. Who else could have hated him that much? Simon doesn't know how he hadn't put everything together before.

But Simon also couldn't understand why August had done this to his own cousin. Doing it to him was one thing but to Wille? Even though he knew August annoyed the shit out of Wille, he thought they were friendly. Or at least they had been, before Christmas... which made more sense now. August had only ever trotted behind Wille like a lost puppy who wanted any scrap Wille threw his way. Did August hate Simon so much that he was willing to make problems for Wille and the family, too? Maybe he knew the whole time that Wille would find a way out of it since it was Simon's face and not Wille's in the video...

Simon wanted to hit something -- or shut off his brain and game.

But he needed his friends to help him make sense of this because Simon didn't know up from down anymore. How did everything get so fucked?!

"What a fucking snake," Ayub exclaimed while leaning over Rosh's shoulder as she looked up laws for Simon.

"We always knew August was an asshole," Rosh chided, removing a lollipop from her mouth.

"Yeah, but I meant Wille," Ayub explained.

Simon half-heard them while his brain continued to spin about Wille and what he could/should do about August.

"Invasion of privacy. Defamation. Guys you know he could be nailed for all of this, right? You guys are minors. That's child pornography. He could go to prison!" Rosh quickly assessed.

Simon's brain had connected something, but it wasn't good news for him.

"Do you remember the guys who whipped a freshman several years ago?" Simon asked.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" Ayub nodded.

"There were, like, nine of them. Two of them had to pay damages. That's it. *Wille is right*. People like them don't get convicted. They get away with everything," Simon said, defeated.

“But everyone knows what they did. Don’t you want to expose what August did?” Rosh challenged.

Simon threw back his head in frustration. “Of course I do,” he said exasperated.

“Well, then. Listen to me. You’ve got us. We’ve got your back. Report him. Then everyone will know what he did,” promised Rosh.

Simon sighed and contemplated what Rosh said. He was grateful to know that his friends would have his back no matter what, but he was worried about what Wille had said, too. He knew that Wille was probably right - August probably would have a great lawyer who would get him out of it. But didn't Simon have to try? Just thinking about August's smug face made Simon's blood boil. He hadn't bothered Simon as much since coming back from break, but suddenly that made more sense. He'd been sniffing around Sara at the stables, though, and Simon still wasn't sure what that was about yet. Regardless, the worst things that happened to Simon at Hillerska had been because of August, and he shouldn't get to treat people like shit and not have people know how low he had sunk. August had filmed and posted minors having sex, and one of those minors was his own cousin! It's sick and twisted, and people should know.

Simon's thoughts were still fighting with each other. He was genuinely getting a headache from thinking about everything. Simon wondered if reporting August would still give him some justice if nothing actually happened to him. Would it still make him feel better if people knew? Part of him thought yes, but the world didn't seem to work against people like August the way it worked against people like Simon. Simon's first time having sex was filmed by that pervert. The worst thing Simon had done that night was sneak into Wille's room, but Simon was the one still losing opportunities because of it. He had lost Wille because of it, too...and it made the possibility of him and Wille trying again harder because Simon would always be the boy in the sex video. How was it fair that the person who had been filmed without consent would possibly suffer more than the person who filmed and posted it on the Internet?! When would August be held accountable?

Would reporting August change how the video had affected him and Wille? This decision kept stalling in Simon's brain. He was so angry and hurt that Wille had made decisions that impacted them without talking to him. When Wille told him it was August, he didn't have time to process what it all meant. Now that he was trying to do that, he felt like he couldn't see the whole picture because he had so many questions that probably only Wille could answer. Simon didn't want to exclude him from the discussion, and it felt bad to do so. He wanted to know how Wille really felt about it all and what their options were. Simon needed to make a decision that was best for him, but it didn't mean that he couldn't also consider how Wille felt and how it would impact him, too.

Simon realized that he still thought of him and Wille as an “us” even though Wille had hurt him; it didn't all seem so straightforward anymore. Simon wished he hadn't walked away from Wille before they'd had a chance to finish discussing everything. Simon wanted Wille to loop him in when information affected both of them, but he realized that he also needed to stick around to sort problems out with Wille and not always walk away.

Simon, Ayub, and Rosh all decided to go back to Simon's house for dinner. He couldn't decide anything about August yet. Today felt like it was two weeks long instead of 24 hrs, so he was letting himself off the hook for making a decision just yet. Maybe he'd text or call Wille after he ate dinner to try talking things through again.

"Can we go? I'm starving! And didn't you say Linda was making her spaghetti?" Ayub interrupted.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go. I need some comfort food," Simon replied.

"Are you going to put ketchup on it again, Simme?! I don't understand how you eat that; how gross can you be?!"

"You're missing out, Rosh. It's not my fault you don't have any taste," Simon teased. Rosh just rolled her eyes as Ayub snorted beside her.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Wille had tried to take away the things that mattered to August the same way he had taken the most important thing away from Wille – Simon. But Wille was starting to see how he had done further harm to Simon. Simon was the one that lost the most every time. How goddamn sick was it that Simon – an actual victim in all of this - would get less protection than the person who committed the crime.

Wille thought that he was making a choice that was best for Simon...but Simon made him realize that it wasn't his place to make that choice. Simon was right; Wille had acted like his mama. Wille was ashamed of himself.

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! I apologize for the delay in getting this chapter posted. I've been acting as a beta reader for a number of other writers, and I was having a little bit of trouble connecting to this chapter. I hope that it does enough to move us along in the story, though, because we have the good stuff coming up in the next one! I'll give you a little bit to look forward to by saying that I am going to add a few elements to the next chapter that we didn't see in the show -- primarily more conversations/interactions between Simon and Wille. I'm excited to share it -- hopefully quicker than I shared this one. Please come chat with me in the comments or on Twitter/Tumblr (@escapethrustory) if you have thoughts to share.

Wille's POV

Breathe in 1...2...3...4...

Hold 1...2...3...4...

Breathe out 1...2...3...4...

Hold 1...2...3...4...

Wille counted his breaths as his hands gripped the window sill, his heart racing from arguing with Simon. He had imagined telling Simon that it had been August who filmed and posted the video countless times before, but when it was time to tell him he couldn't remember anything he had planned to say.

Wille knows he made his own choice to not tell Simon about August earlier, but regardless of when he told him, August is still coming between him and Simon. What would things be like if August hadn't been here at Hillerska? Sometimes Wille really wishes he knew, because August seems to have a hand in a lot of what has gone sideways for him since he came to Hillerska.

Just a few hours ago Wille had felt so happy and hopeful about having a fresh start with Simon. They had kissed each other last night, and Wille felt like that changed everything. He thought he had lost Simon for good – that Simon didn't love him anymore and was officially in a couple with Marcus. The kiss and the moment he shared with Simon last night while he sang his new version of the Hillerska song had felt like a reset, but Wille could tell something was wrong when Simon would barely make eye contact with him this morning and didn't acknowledge the sandwich he made for him.

Wille felt dumb for not even realizing that the song Simon wrote was about him. Wille had been so caught up in listening to how beautiful Simon sounded and remembering how the kisses they had shared still lingered on his lips. Simon had smiled at him – his smile stretching to his sparkling brown eyes – and Wille had been transported right back to his other memories of Simon singing and smiling at him as if he was the only person in the room...the only person that mattered. Finding out that the song was actually about him just felt like he was *actually dreaming* because Wille didn't think he got to occupy space in Simon's heart anymore.

But it might as well have been a dream because Wille barely had any time to absorb that information or be happy about it before Simon told him that everything in his life was complicated by Wille entering the picture. Jan Olaf wasn't letting Simon sing at the Jubilee, which Simon argued was a result of the Royal Court not wanting him associated with Wille. The worst part was that Simon was probably right. Simon even said that their kiss had been a mistake and had walked away angry without Wille really knowing where that left things.

Wille is panicking at the thought of Simon giving up on them again. Simon believed that he was the only one being punished for the video...so Wille had to tell him about August. Immediately Wille saw the disbelief, hurt, and anger flash across Simon's face when he found out that Wille had known about August for a while.

Wille had genuinely thought he was doing a good thing...the right thing, even...by not telling Simon about August. Wille knew Simon would want to go to the police, ultimately leading nowhere because the Royal Court and his mother would protect August. Wille had tried to make August pay in his way by encouraging Vincent to take over as Prefect and Rowing Captain...Wille had tried to take away the things that mattered to August the same way he had taken the most important thing away from Wille – Simon. But Wille was starting to see how he had done further harm to Simon. Simon was the one that lost the most every time. How goddamn sick was it that Simon – an actual victim in all of this - would get less protection than the person who committed the crime.

Wille thought that he was making a choice that was best for Simon...but Simon made him realize that it wasn't his place to make that choice. Simon was right; Wille had acted like his mama. Wille was ashamed of himself.

Wille felt his heart begin to race again, his thoughts spiraling thinking about how he had hurt Simon again by doing the same thing his mama had done to him – the thing Wille hated. He had fucked up so badly...

How was he going to fix this?

Wille started focusing on his breathing again - counting and holding for counts of four - imagining a box the way Boris had taught him.

Breathe in 1...2...3...4...

Hold 1...2...3...4...

Breathe out 1...2...3...4...

Hold 1...2...3...4...

Wille was back in his room with Jan Olaf and the tailor getting fitted with a new uniform so that the one he wore for the Jubilee would fit him perfectly. His mind was still cycling through ways to make things right with Simon, but he still wasn't sure how to do that. When it came to Simon, it felt like he was making all the wrong choices. If Wille was good at something, he was good at disappointing people...

Jan Olaf interrupted Wille's spiral, his impatience with Wille underlining his words. "Has your Highness looked at the speech?"

"No, not yet," Wille replied honestly.

"Please do so as soon as possible," Jan Olaf chastised.

"Yeah, I will," Wille huffed, wanting to discuss something else. "Why did you change the choir's song? You removed Simon's song," Wille probed, finding the necessary resolve to take control of this conversation.

"Because the Hillis song is so much more fitting. Everyone can sing along," Jan Olaf replied with enthusiasm as if he had singlehandedly saved the event.

"Okay, so not because of him?" Wille pushed.

"Show me the suit," Jan Olaf directed.

Wille rolled his eyes and turned around to face the old man.

"Perfect," Jan Olaf beamed side-stepping Wilhelm's question.

Wille felt his cheeks flush with frustration because it was clear Jan Olaf was done discussing Simon's song. He'd have to take it up with his mama instead. Wille grits his teeth and his eyes dart around the room, his gaze catching his reflection in the mirror—a reflection he

barely recognized as himself anymore. The young man looking back at him wasn't the boy that had come to Hillerska just a few months ago. No, this boy looked older, tired, more withdrawn, more buttoned-up...or sophisticated than the one with bruises and long floppy hair had been when he first turned up here.

The shift had happened gradually and rather quietly, actually, but the evidence was staring Wille right in the face. Wille's memory flashed to the night before, when he had stood in front of this same mirror with his wig and powdered makeup. Tears had rolled down his cheeks when he realized how much he looked the part of a stereotypical "prince," but that had only been a costume, hadn't it? This was only his school uniform—the same one everyone else wore here—but it wasn't the clothes that mattered, he realized. These changes went deeper than that, and he was starting to lose even more control over who he was and what he allowed others to decide for him. Wille didn't know how to stop that from happening. How could he stay Wille and not some fake version of himself??

Suddenly everything felt tight, and his pulse quickened. He felt the blood drain from his face and his throat burn as if his skin was suddenly on fire. Wille pulled at his collar, desperate to get some space and air. "I don't know if it should be this tight. I can't breathe..."

He wrenched his collar open and heard a button thud on the carpet below him.

"Sorry. It was just... a bit tight," Wille explained apologetically, his chest heaving as he rubbed it.

"We'll sew it back on," Jan Olaf assured him, barely disturbed by the anxious boy in front of him.

Wille sighed and took a breath—his hand still rubbing across his chest as he tried to tame the panic that had threatened to choke him just moments ago.

Now that Wille was alone in his room, he removed his jacket as quickly as possible and tossed it aside on the second bed that mostly went unused in his room. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he dialed his mama and dropped the phone onto his desk, shoving his hands in his pockets while he waited for the call to connect.

"Hi, honey. How are you?"

"So-so."

"So-so? How come?" Kristina asked carefully.

Wille took a breath and pressed forward. "If Simon can't sing his song at the Jubilee, I won't give the speech," Wille attempted to bargain, his gaze now steely in the mirror in front of him.

"What... What are you talking about?" Kristina asked trying to get her bearings in this negotiation.

“Jan-Olaf said that they’re doing the tired old song, not Simon’s. Simon blames me for it,” Wille huffed petulantly.

Kristina barely held back a laugh. “Honey, I need to make it perfectly clear to you that Jan-Olaf’s decision is about what is best for our visit and for your speech,” Kristina assured, now that she realized this was about Simon again.

“Please, I don’t want to give the speech. Erik never had to make speeches before he came of age. Why do I have to? I don’t get it,” Wille whined, losing his footing and the intention he’d had when he first made this call.

Kristina paused, choosing her words carefully. “Wilhelm, if you don’t give the speech, then August will do it.”

“Why would August give the speech? What are you talking about?” Wille asked, suddenly upside down in this conversation.

“The Royal Court strategists are worried that you can’t take the pressure,” Kristina explained.

Wille huffed, it sinking in with absolute clarity now that at the same time that he was sacrificing the love of his life for the stupid crown—a life he never wanted—he was also being used until they can toss him aside when they were done with him and replace him with August, of all people. The thought took the air out of his lungs, so he sat down on his bed, needing to feel supported before his legs gave out beneath him.

“Who will take over the throne? If you are deemed unfit... or if you abdicate, or if... If there is no heir apparent, we risk destroying our entire system of government,” Kristina implored. “You must understand that it’s better to take August into the family fold now... That way, the transition won’t feel as forced,” Kristina finished, desperately trying to keep her voice even and not spook Wille even more than she already had.

Wille felt mad with fury, disbelief washing over him as he struggled to catch up to the possibility that August might ascend the throne.

“What are you saying? He’s being rewarded for ruining my life?” Wille asked, incredulously, feeling the anger rise in his throat as he got to his feet again, needing to pace and burn off the adrenaline now coursing through his veins.

“Stop it. No one’s being rewarded here,” Kristina tutted. “What do you want us to do here?” Kristina asked, the desperation coming through in her voice now.

Wille squeezed his eyes shut and leaned over his desk, feeling the bile rise in his throat.

“There is no one else. If you don’t give that speech, August will give it,” she punctuated as directly and concisely as possible.

“This is insane. How can you think this is a good idea?” Wille asked, still reeling, but getting angrier by the second.

“I don’t want this either. But sometimes, we have to put our own needs aside. I can’t force you. And I shouldn’t have to either,” Kristina tried reasoning, her voice regaining steadiness.

Wille chewed at his nail and sat down again, crossing his arms in frustration, trying to absorb everything his mama was saying.

“Just remember that... your decisions don’t just affect you. I need you... *on my team*, Wilhelm,” she cried out, her voice getting watery.

Wille sighed and reached across his desk to touch the shattered pieces of his Frog Prince snow globe. Suddenly it felt like there was a small crack in the glass walls that had closed around Wille when he found out Erik had died and his brain absorbed what that meant for him as the spare.

“You need to give the speech to show you can manage the role of Crown Prince. If you don’t take the throne, August will,” the Queen finished.

Wille’s mind raced with the possibilities he had before him now that the glass walls around him had their first crack in them. Would this small crack grow to become a larger one over time, or would a bit more force make the entire thing shatter around him? Where did this leave him? Where did it leave Simon? Suddenly this was a lot bigger than whether Simon could sing his song at the Jubilee or not. Wille needed to think...

He began to change his clothes, opting for something more comfortable. He needed to eat an early dinner and make his way to his therapy session with Boris. There was a lot to talk about now that Wille contemplated his options in the line of succession. Wille wishes that the role of Crown Prince was getting easier/more comfortable for him, but he feels like his anxiety about it is getting even worse. Wille had serious doubts that the role would ever be the right fit for him.

Wille grabbed a paper cup to prepare some tea that he would sip during his session with Boris. He needed something warm to soothe the anxiety that was crackling beneath the surface. When he first started coming here he barely wanted to talk to the man let alone share a cup of tea.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t think, I just do, and then everything goes wrong,” Wille explained with frustration.

“The burden you carry, Wilhelm, can be horribly, horribly heavy. Not just for you, for anyone.”

“Sure, but I should be able to handle it,” Wille huffed.

“Should you?” Boris retorted.

“Yes. Because this is what we do. All the time, with everything.”

“Who are ‘we’?”

“Mama, the family, the Court. I just don’t understand why I can’t handle it. It can’t be that hard. Erik did it. There was the *real Erik* and *Prince Erik*. He managed it with ease. I know I should be grateful for everything I get, who I am, and all the privileges I have. How hard can it be? How hard can it be to give awards, cut ribbons, give speeches?” Wille exclaimed, annoyed with himself that the expectations put on him as Crown Prince felt so impossible.

“Being grateful can also mean that you... that you feel guilt. That you feel that you have a debt to pay. And it... it can be... It can be a tremendous pressure. Especially if you’re given something that you never really asked for.”

“Yeah, absolutely, but... I owe them so much. I must do these things.”

“Must you really?”

“Yes, they’re counting on me.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

“Mama...”

“Here’s the thing. When you come here, I want you to feel that... you’re allowed to feel whatever you feel. Only what you feel, and not always thinking about what’s best for other people all the time. We can’t choose who we’re born as. But we can choose how we want to live our lives.”

Wille tried to digest Boris’ words. Wille never really felt like he had a real choice in how to live his life—especially not since becoming Crown Prince, but Boris’ line of questioning was making him challenge that perspective. What would it mean for Wille to make choices that reflected his beliefs and values? What kind of life would he live? The wheels inside Wille’s head were turning...

He had never wanted this life as a Prince, let alone Crown Prince. He didn’t want to let his mama down or tarnish Erik’s memory and legacy, but could he possibly let August take his place in the line of succession?

Wille walked down the hall toward his room when he heard August’s voice coming from the common room. He stopped, listening to August explain how to play chess. Wille walked back toward the common room, stopping in the doorway to see a group of boys huddled around the table listening to August’s advice.

“Look... in two, two, or three moves... Then if I move here... Here I can see... you’re thinking about... I’ll have you in six... six or seven. That’s it. Come on. You’re thinking... All right then.”

August looked up and noticed Wille standing there. “Can I help you?”

Wille stood there thinking about August and his leadership. Wille may have taken away his Prefect and Rowing Captain status, but August still naturally had people hanging on his every

word. Could August be a good King? Wille still had such a hard time stomaching that possibility...but he had to think about what he had to gain or lose from this instead of only ruling it out because of his anger. If anything, it seemed like August would relish being in the role... a lot more than Wille did, that's for sure.

“Never mind,” Wille replied; he didn’t have anything to say to August yet.

Wille had decided that he needed to talk to Simon about their options. Simon wanted to go to the police, but he didn’t know that August was his backup. As Crown Prince, everything about being with Simon became more complicated...but what if Wille stepped aside and let August fill in for him? If Simon still wanted to be with him, maybe this could be a way...

But if Simon went to the police to report August, then it probably wouldn’t be an option anymore. Simon needs to know what the options are before he decided what to do about August. Wille would like August to be held responsible for the video, but he worried that nothing would come from him being reported. At least this way, Simon and Wille might get a different kind of justice—being together without the shadow of his responsibilities as Crown Prince.

Wille had gone to the guard house and asked Malin if she could do him a favor and drive him to Simon’s house, so now he was sitting in a car outside Simon’s house gathering his courage to go speak to him.

But just then he saw Simon walking down the road with Ayub and Rosh alongside him. This was Wille’s chance, so he opened the car door to catch them before they went inside. He didn’t expect Simon would want to invite him inside right now.

“Hey...” Wille called out to Simon before he opened the front door. Simon stopped and turned toward Wille, surprise on his face.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you. It’s just that August... is next in line in the order of succession. After me. He’s my backup,” Wille explained, letting the new information hang in the air for a few seconds. “It means that I could let him take over. I could be free. From all this. I could be free with you...”

Simon’s eyes widened, but Wille pressed on. “But if you go to the police, I no longer have a backup. I no longer have a choice. I can’t be free. I’ll be betraying my whole family, betraying Erik. I don’t want that,” Wille admitted.

“This isn’t just so I won’t press charges?”

“No.”

“You’re not just protecting him?” Simon challenged.

“No. You have to do what’s best for you, Simon. I just wanted you to know. This is the situation. This is how I feel,” Wille finished.

Simon had told him at the beginning of the term that Wille should try being honest about his feelings, so he was trying to do that now. He wanted everything to be out on the table for Simon.

Simon sighed, and Wille could see that he needs to give Simon more time to think through these options. “That’s all,” Wille explained. Wille’s eyes swept over Simon’s face one more time hoping that they would have more time to talk another day. Wille turned around on his heel to give Simon that time and space to consider everything he had just told him. Wille was nervous; he just needed Simon to know that he was done making decisions for him. He meant what he said—Simon has to decide what’s best for him. Wille wanted him to have all the information and know what Wille wanted, but he also knew now that he was finished with cutting Simon out of those decisions. He didn’t like how it felt when others did it to him, and he hadn’t even realized that he was doing the same thing. It made him feel pretty awful, actually. He wanted to believe that he could and would be better than that; Simon deserved that much.

Wille would respect whatever Simon decided, but he didn’t know if he could go back to minimal contact and just being friends in school when just 24 hours ago Wille’s hope that they would try again had been revived. Wille wanted to be with Simon more than anything else—even just thinking about the possibility of letting August take over made Wille feel better about a future with Simon. Wille didn’t want August to be King, but a life without Simon by his side was something he wanted even less.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Simon swallowed as he and his friends walked inside his house. He still didn't know where things stood with Wille—a lot had happened—but regardless, things had shifted. They were *still* shifting... Simon wasn't sure if Rosh and Ayub would be very happy about him kissing Wille, but he definitely had a lot to tell them. *Operation Get a Rebound* had failed spectacularly.

Chapter Notes

Oh my goodness...this chapter has been a real labor of love for me. If you follow me on Twitter (@escapethrustory), you know that I've been working on it pretty steadily in the time that has passed since I posted the last chapter. Some of the scenes that are in this chapter are actually the main reason that I wanted to write this fic in the first place. As a viewer of the show, I felt like we had missed some conversations in the last few episodes. With Simon in particular, I really wanted to understand how he had gotten to the point he did to make some of the decisions that he made. Two of those conversations are included as brand new scenes in this chapter--one I've told my Twitter followers about (the convo Simon had with Ayub & Rosh after Wille told Simon that August was his backup), but the other one I haven't mentioned on Twitter; it'll be a surprise for you as you read. 💜 And then of course, I hope the rest of the chapter really helps you get inside Simon's internal world as he's interacting with people and processing all of his thoughts and feelings.

I was genuinely so inspired to write this chapter, so it turned into a monster chapter -- tapping in at just under 12K words. 🥰 I hope that makes up for the wait time you've had since the last one. I'm really excited to share it with you! We're also getting closer to the boys' (cough) intimate scene, and some other brand-new scenes that I've been looking forward to imagining for you. Let me send a BIG thank you to my 3 amazing beta readers for this monster chapter - @stretchoutandwait, @SamMac85, @Spidaya. They all gave me incredibly helpful and supportive feedback. All 3 of them have written many fics that I've absolutely loved so much, so please check all 3 of them out if you haven't read their work already.

I'll see you on the other side! I am motivated by kudos and comments, so I'd absolutely love to know what you think!! Feel free to find me on Twitter or Tumblr (@escapethrustory)

Simon's POV

“Did he just say he’d renounce his throne for you?” Ayub asked incredulously.

Simon was still standing there, slightly stunned, eyes fixed on the now empty spot where Wille had just been standing.

“That’s what it sounded like to me. What the hell? What have we missed, Simon? Did something else happen other than you finding out that Wille knew it was August who filmed the video? It seems like Wille thinks there’s a chance for you to be together... I thought...” Rosh started without finishing, not knowing how far to probe.

Ayub coughed and shifted from one foot to the other as he looked between Rosh and Simon, seemingly bracing himself for whatever Simon was going to tell them.

“Yeah, there’s more to tell you... let’s go inside first. I’ll catch you up while we eat,” Simon said after finding his voice again.

Simon swallowed as he and his friends walked inside his house. He still didn’t know where things stood with Wille—a lot had happened—but regardless, things had shifted. They were *still* shifting... Simon wasn’t sure if Rosh and Ayub would be very happy about him kissing Wille, but he definitely had a lot to tell them. *Operation Get a Rebound* had failed spectacularly.

They were crowded around the table, a bowl of spaghetti in front of each of them. Simon’s mama had made it for them before she had to leave again for a night shift. Simon was grateful to have the house to themselves while he caught his friends up on everything that had happened the last few days.

“I’m not even going to say anything about the ketchup... you’ve got us on the edge of our seats, Eriksson. Out with it,” Rosh implored.

“Okay, okay. Well, Marcus showed up to go to the Valentine’s Ball at Hillerska with me even though he initially told me he didn’t want to go.”

“Well, that was nice of him, bro. I like Marcus. He seems to really like you,” Ayub added.

“Yeah...it was cool of him to come. I really didn’t think he was going to...but it sort of felt like he was more interested in getting me to spend the night afterward than he was in being there, though. He kept asking me when we were going to leave, and he seemed annoyed that I had to sing and couldn’t skip it entirely,” Simon explained.

“Oh...well that doesn’t sound that nice after all. He shouldn’t be pressuring you. So what happened? Did you spend the night there?”

Simon swallowed thickly and sheepishly shook his head. “No; I told him that mama wouldn’t let me stay over since I had school the next day. But the truth was I never even asked her...”

And I had kissed Wille... his brain supplied, but he didn't want to get ahead of himself. There was still more he had to catch them up on.

"You know you could have told her you were staying at mine if you needed to," Ayub chimed in.

"Yeah, thanks. I didn't want to spend the night with Marcus..." *Time to rip the bandaid off...*
"Truthfully, I don't want anything else to happen with him—in terms of dating him, or whatever. To start with, I thought you guys were right—that a rebound would help me stop thinking about Wille. I tried to hook up with him that time I went over to his place to watch a movie, but he stopped me. Thinking about it now, I'm really glad he did. I think I would have regretted it," Simon said, as he shook his head and resisted the urge to shudder when their first kiss flashed in his mind.

"OK...well of course we support you. You told us before that you weren't even sure if you liked him or not and didn't know why you couldn't fall in love with him...so it's not *that* big of a surprise to me," Rosh admitted with a smile on her face.

Before he could stop himself a giggle fell from Simon's lips. "Oh, god. Yeah. I think I've known from the start that Marcus wasn't a good idea...but it was nice to try with someone. On paper, it seemed like we were a good fit, but the reality of things was different. I liked that he was out and just a normal guy like me, but some things made me uncomfortable. And I guess I was just forcing things...and running away from my feelings about everything that happened with Wille. I only ever wanted to hang out with Marcus when I was upset about Wille, which isn't a good enough reason..."

"Can I ask what made you uncomfortable?" Rosh wanted to know. She had been the most vocal about encouraging Simon to get a rebound, so Simon was treading carefully in this conversation.

"Well, he was a bit pushy...texting all the time, even going up to you guys when I didn't text back, and that sort of thing. But also there was one night that I went to see him a week or two ago. I went there to tell him that I wasn't ready for anything serious...and that I didn't know when I would be... It was my way of telling him I wanted to stop hanging out. He was acting like we were a couple or something, and that wasn't what I wanted. I didn't know him well enough or feel strong enough to be a couple, but he wouldn't take the hint. He told me he'd wait for me. He said all this stuff and asked if I didn't want to be with him because of Wille. He said he wasn't like him, and that I didn't have good role models for 'healthy relationships' because of Micke...and—"

"Excuse me? He said what?! What the hell, Simon!" Rosh exclaimed, a line furrowed between her brows.

"That was fucked up, right?"

"Absolutely, bro. That's not ok," Ayub added, as he helped himself to more pasta.

"Before I knew it he said, 'we'll take it slow...you wouldn't want to destroy something this beautiful...'"

“Gag. He said that?” Rosh asked, as she pushed her bowl away from her.

“Yeah. He honestly said that - word for word. And I don’t know if it was because he had just brought up Micke, but then he hugged me and it didn’t feel right. It doesn’t feel safe when he hugs or kisses me...and I don’t know what’s that about, honestly. I just know it feels off...” Simon said, frowning.

“That’s enough, Simon. You don’t have to know why. Your feelings are valid,” Rosh reminded him.

Simon nodded and smiled at his friend and continued with the update, “And then he asked me if he could come to our rowing competition the next day. I told him he didn’t have to. I didn’t want to be rude about it and tell him not to come, but I guess I was hoping he wouldn’t show. But he did, and afterward, he told me what a good job I did even though we lost, and then he grabbed me and kissed me...right in front of Wille. This was the very next day after I told him I wanted to slow things down. Instead, he acted like he was my boyfriend even more...but it wasn’t what I wanted. I let him kiss me because *he wanted to kiss*. Since he saw us after the competition, Wille asked me if we were a couple, and even though we weren’t—not to me, anyway—I just shrugged my shoulders and let him think we were...I was upset because he hooked up with Felice. And of course, all those macho Forest Ridge douches cheered for him to get on the table because they had to celebrate him and his hetero hookup,” Simon scoffed with clear annoyance all over his face.

Rosh held up her hand to stop Simon’s breathless rant. “Excuse me? Rewind a second. Wille hooked up with who?”

“Felice. She’s Sara’s roommate and best friend at school. She’s close with Wille now, too - especially since we ended things. She’s my friend, too. We’re in choir together.”

“But Felicia and Wille just hooked up? That’s so messed up,” Ayub declared, not impressed at all.

“Felice, Ayub. Not Felicia,” Rosh corrected before Simon could do it himself.

“Oh, well. Tomato *tomato*.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t know if I can judge too much when I’ve been with Marcus. Don’t get me wrong; I was pissed. I even pelted Wille hard with a dodgeball the other day because I felt so salty about it all.”

Ayub and Rosh started snickering and clapping. “Bro, what? You pelted Wille with a dodgeball?”

Simon started laughing himself when he saw the looks on his friends’ faces. They all belly-laughed for a few minutes. Every time their laughter died down they started again. Simon felt better already. It helped to laugh at how ridiculous his life had become.

“But back to Marcus...” Simon continued, “I didn’t realize until I thought about it the other day, but I never told him anything at all about Wille...or about Micke, for that matter. He said

he never saw the video, but he said stuff sometimes and referred to ‘rumors,’ as if everything he heard was true and he knew everything about it. I *never* confirmed I had been with Wille. So it was messed up for him to talk about it like that and assume that he knew the whole story. And the stuff about Micke he heard because our moms talked. He brought all this external shit into our conversations and it pissed me off. He acted like he knew everything about me when he hadn’t even tried to get to know me. I don’t even know if he really likes me or if he just likes who he thinks I am...” Simon trailed off, thoughtfully. He was still processing everything about Marcus.

“Wow. I’m so sorry, Simon. I had no idea... I really thought you could just have a fun rebound. I didn’t know he would be kind of an ass to you. None of that is ok. I feel bad that we encouraged you to be with him.”

“It’s not your fault. *I decided to hang out with him*; at first, I thought it would help,” Simon admitted. “I know you guys just wanted me not to be sad... But everything with Wille was not something I could get over that easily... and maybe I don’t want to get over it... in the same way, anyway.”

“OK, bro. Was that everything that happened with Marcus?”

“Yeah... I haven’t officially ended things with him. I’ve avoided him since the ball. He has texted me trying to plan another night for me to stay over at his.”

“Gag. Read the room, Marcus.”

“Exactly—I don’t think he can...”

“OK, so what about Wille? Why did he show up at your house all of a sudden talking about renouncing the freaking throne to be with you? What did we miss?? Something else must have happened between him hooking up with Felice and turning up in your driveway to offer to renounce thrones and shit.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah...*that*,” quipped Rosh.

“So...I umm...I kissed Wille...at the ball.”

“He kissed you? Or you kissed him?”

“*I* kissed him...” Simon punctuated.

“Car honking. Tires screech. Car crash. Glass breaking. Gunshots. Sirens approaching...”

“You’re an idiot. Shut up, Ayub,” Rosh said smacking his arm.

“Bro, you’ve definitely kept us out of the loop. Have you forgiven Wille? Obviously, everything with Marcus wasn’t working...but did something else change with Wille?” Ayub asked more seriously.

“As I said, at first I was just pissed about the hookup with Felice. Hitting him with that dodgeball felt a little too good...”

“So were you jealous? I know you were with Marcus and everything, but that doesn’t mean you can’t also be jealous...our brains and hearts don’t always make sense,” Rosh said soberly.

“Yeah; I guess I was a little jealous. Mostly I was annoyed that they wanted him to get on the table for that whole stupid tradition. Wille was actually really angry, too. He didn’t want to talk about it...but Vincent is such a dick, and apparently, Henry saw it and had blabbed, so they forced Wille’s hand. I walked out because it was all too much...I tried to sort my feelings out, but I still wasn’t sure what I was feeling. When Marcus showed up at my house to take me to the ball, I was surprised and just wanted to have fun. But Marcus felt uncomfortable around all the Hillerska people, and the whole time I kept thinking about how Wille and I never got to go to things like that together. Being there with Marcus should have felt good, because he could be there as my date and showed up—whatever the reason was—but the truth was I just wanted to be there with Wille instead. He kept looking at me all night. At one point he came over to us while Marcus and I were at the dessert table...”

“The dessert table? These people have a whole table full of dessert? What kind of posh school do you go to, Simon?” Rosh teased.

Simon rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out at his friends. “Yeah, yeah. Well, I thought Wille was going to come over and be a dick to him or something. I was ready to be mad at him...but instead, he came over and made small talk with Marcus about his stupid costume and how Marcus was smart for dressing up as a waiter...”

“I swear, bro. Every time you tell us more about this posh school I’m more and more confused. I don’t know how you do it,” Ayub quipped.

“Can we let him finish, Ayub? Stay focused,” Rosh encouraged.

Simon chuckled to himself—more grateful than ever to have friends who brought him right back down to earth. He continued, “So, yeah. Wille made small talk with him and asked him how things were going at the shooting range, and Wille said I should go with them sometime. Like seriously, my ex-whatever-he-is and the current guy I’m seeing were planning to bro-out together and shoot guns? I didn’t understand what the hell was happening and how we got there. It all felt so weird. I was literally just frozen and didn’t know what to say. Wille had this fake-ass smile plastered on his face and was being so polite and nice. Even Marcus said how nice Wille was and that he wasn’t as stuck-up as he had been when he and Felice went there one time...”

“Well, Wille is a lot of things, but he’s definitely less stuck-up than I ever expected, too. I mean, he came to my football match and ate hot dogs with the best of us...” Rosh conceded.

“Yeah, I know... it’s what drew me to Wille in the first place. He is different from what people expect him to be. He has the most reason to walk around the school like he’s better than everyone...but he’s less likely to do it, most of the time. But anyway, my head felt really scrambled by the conversation with Wille and Marcus. Marcus went to the bathroom and I

went to find Wille again to ask him what it was all about. He was confused at first, so I told him it felt weird. Because it did...it felt *so weird* to go from Wille being after me to be with him to *that*. I felt like I had missed 5 steps... but Wille said he was just trying to be polite. And then he... he..." Simon stammered a bit, feeling the emotion of that moment come back to him. That moment when his heart had fallen through his stomach to the floor—and all the air knocked out of his lungs—when Wille essentially gave him his blessing to be happy with Marcus. He felt tears prickle in his eyes again, as he remembered that feeling of being so caught off-guard that Wille had been willing to let him go so he could be happy and realizing it was the last damn thing he wanted.

"Simon...are you okay? All the color drained from your face," Rosh said, her voice soft with concern.

Simon coughed back the lump in his throat. "Yeah...yeah...sorry. It just was a lot. Wille told me that he understood that I didn't love him anymore...he told me that he would leave me alone...and that my boyfriend was very nice...and then he left the ball...before I sang my song...the song I wrote about him."

Simon's words hung there in the air for what felt like forever. He looked between the faces of his two best friends as they absorbed what he had said. Suddenly he could see the emotion and understanding on both of their faces, too.

"Wow...So Wille actually put your happiness ahead of his? Right? Like he was telling you he was happy for you if you were happy?" Rosh asked, connecting some pieces.

Simon could only nod his head...if he spoke right now the tears would probably slip down his cheeks...and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to stop them once he started.

"...but you're *not* happy with Marcus..." Rosh continued connecting.

Simon shook his head and looked down at his fingers, pulling his sleeves down over his hands. He felt really bad about hurting Marcus in all of this, even though he had warned Marcus.

"...and you do...you do still love Wille, then?" Rosh asked softly, no judgment present in her tone.

There it was again. Simon had never said those words out loud to anyone—not to Wille, not to Sara, not to his mama, and not to Ayub and Rosh. But they saw it. They knew it. Simon knew it... He loved—strike that. *He was in love with Wille*. He was in love with his crooked teeth and his freckled skin...his gangly limbs and his sheepish laugh. He was in love with the way he flushed when he was embarrassed and the way he'd constantly run his fingers through his hair, even now when it's shorter. He was in love with the way he made sure Simon had eaten and the way he hung on him like a koala when they were together. He loved that he had never judged Simon for not having money or even really brought attention to it. He loved that he respected the people Simon loved and got to know them or spent time with them because he knew it mattered to Simon. He loved that he wasn't afraid to be vulnerable but was still so so brave.

"I...I realized at that moment that I didn't want Wille to let me go. I didn't want him to stop fighting. I *was* trying to move on...I felt like I had to set a boundary after he denied the video. Sara kept telling me that I let people walk all over me and that I've given people too many chances...it really got in my head that maybe I've done that with Wille. Everything felt so damn right when he and I were together. Being with him made my heart race and stupid butterflies swirl in my stomach every time he got close to me. And he always checked in with me...like now that I can compare it to Marcus, Wille didn't kiss me or even touch me when I didn't want him to...he watched me so carefully and gave me space. It was just *right*...the way that things were when it was just us. I know that the outside stuff needs to be figured out because obviously he still really hurt me. But I realized today that I have run away from him when we've needed to have tough conversations. It's not fair of me to expect Wille to figure it all out by himself when it affects both of us...involves both of us. And maybe he didn't include me because I had already pushed him away. I don't know...I just feel a little differently than I did a few months ago," Simon admitted, still working out those thoughts.

Rosh looked at him like she could see the gears turning in his head. "So what now? Today you found out that he kept it from you that August is responsible for the video, but he also came here and said he wanted to abdicate and be 'free with you'. Those are both really big revelations, Simon. Marcus is definitely not a good fit either, I get that now...But is everything with Wille worth these really big challenges? We're only 16," Rosh gently reminded him.

Simon swallowed and breathed for a minute or so; his brain was still catching up to all the new revelations he'd had in the last few days. "I am still figuring that out...I know that my feelings for Wille aren't gone. I'm still angry and upset about some things that have happened, and I don't know if we can find a way to make things work out or not, but I want to talk to him more to see if there's a way to figure things out when I don't shut him out," Simon explained.

"I don't know if I could forgive myself for not trying, at least. Because it seems like he's trying...him coming here to tell me what he did tonight but still telling me that it was my decision and that he just wanted me to know how he felt and what he wants *is* progress for us. I've been asking him to do that. And him being nice to Marcus even though he was hurting really meant something to me. He may not have been clear on how I feel and what I want—which is really more my fault than his—but was still willing to put that above what he wants and feels, which is also progress. So yeah, I want to try and see what we figure out," Simon declared, making his mind up.

Simon felt like he had more clarity than he'd had in months. Something close to hope was flickering in his chest like the tiniest flame was still burning, needing some protection and oxygen to keep it from dying out.

Just then a loud belch cut through the silence from Ayub's spot at the table, which was just so typical. The sound ripped Simon from his reverie as he noticed Rosh slapping Ayub on the arm.

"Seriously, Ayub?! Way to ruin a moment. Our friend here is making big moves that possibly affect the whole damn country and you're busy belching out your dinner?" Rosh chastised

with an unmistakable smile lifting at the corners of her lips.

“What?! Dinner was good...my compliments to the chef and all that...And, I’m proud of you, Simme. You know that, right?” Ayub asked seriously.

“You’re ridiculous. Yes, I know. Thanks, Ayub,” Simon chuckled.

Simon said goodbye to Rosh and Ayub, thanking them profusely for listening to him talk about his complicated love life for nearly the whole day. They told him to update them later if anything else happened. So much had happened today, but their conversation had helped him a lot. He hadn’t decided what to do about all of it, but it had helped him organize his thoughts and feelings a bit more, and that was definitely helpful.

Simon finished washing the last few dishes from their dinner because he didn’t want his mama to come home to a mess following her shift. It still wasn’t terribly late, so Simon decided he’d check in with Wille. Simon didn’t want to leave Wille in the dark about how he felt. Simon had told Wille that he had thought their kiss was a mistake, which wasn’t truly how he felt. And he had yelled at Wille for protecting himself and making decisions for Simon, which was still partly how he felt, but Simon could see that it was probably more complicated than all of that... he had questions, at least, so he wanted to clear the air after walking away the way he did. And now that Simon had taken some time to process what Wille had said tonight, he also wanted to tell Wille he could see that he was trying. Simon pulled out his phone from his back pocket and plopped down on the bed to text him.

Simon: Hey... are you still up? I wanted to talk if we can.

Simon was in the middle of changing into something more comfortable when his phone pinged with a notification. He pulled on a pair of joggers and reached to unlock his phone.

Markus: Hey, Simon. You owe me a redo. Movie night and sleepover at my house this weekend?? 😊😊

Simon groaned and tossed his phone back on the bed. Marcus really couldn’t take a hint that Simon wasn’t interested. He didn’t owe him anything. Marcus was really starting to give him the ick. He honestly wasn’t sure why Marcus kept returning for more when Simon had barely shown much interest since that first movie night. Simon treated him more like a friend than a boy he was interested in dating, which is what they were... Simon needed to stop giving mixed signals and just clear the air for good. One more thing to add to the list, he thought as his phone pinged again.

“Ugh...for fuck’s sake,” Simon growled, but he saw that it was Wille this time.

💜Wille💜: Hey...Yeah. That would be good, actually. Text? Or video call?

Simon: Video call if that’s OK? I’m home alone now.

💜Wille💜: Yeah, sure. Give me 5 minutes.

Simon pulled his favorite purple hoodie over his head and settled with his legs crisscrossed on the bed and his back against the wall while he waited for Wille's call. He pulled his sleeves over his hands and took a deep breath. Simon didn't want to mess this up. His phone buzzed with Wille's incoming call, and Simon took one more breath to settle himself before pressing accept.

Wille's face appeared on his screen looking even more sad and tired than he had looked just a few hours ago standing in Simon's driveway. "Are you OK?" Simon asked.

Wille smiled gently, "Yeah...this day has just been a roller coaster, I guess... but I feel a little better now... since you're talking to me," Wille admitted.

Simon smiled sheepishly, "Yeah, look. I'm really sorry...—"

"Simon, you don't have to apologize to me, you—"

"Hey...let me finish, okay? I need to get this out," Simon said softly, but firmly.

Wille just nodded and gave his attention, taking a deep breath while he waited.

Simon had been noticing that Wille was doing a better job managing his emotions, and right now he was grateful for it. This conversation could go a few different ways, but he really wanted to get through it.

Simon started again, "Like I was saying, I want to apologize for walking away this afternoon...and for saying the kiss was a mistake. First off, I know everything is complicated with us, and we do have a lot to figure out, but the point is I want to try. I don't regret kissing you..."

Simon saw Wille exhale with relief, his breath coming out as an elongated shudder.

"I regret that the video happened to begin with and that it made a tough situation even harder, but I don't regret kissing you the other night, or being with you, to begin with...even with everything that happened after...I need you to know that. It all meant a lot to me...*you mean a lot to me*," Simon managed, not able to fully look Wille in the eyes.

"I do?"

"Yes, Wille. And I'm sorry for ever making you wonder about that. You've hurt me, so I've tried to protect myself...I tried to move on...but I wasn't trying to hurt you with Marcus. He was sort of there suddenly and asked me out, so I agreed. But we weren't together, not like that. I need you to know that I didn't lie to you when I said that...I just didn't correct you," Simon admitted.

"Oh," Wille replied, biting back a question.

"Yeah...we can talk about all of that another time, maybe? If you want. I'd rather not talk about Marcus much beyond that for now if that's OK?" Simon asked.

“Uhh, yeah. Sure. That’s OK, but thanks for telling me. I know you don’t owe me that,” Wille said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Yeah, I know. But I wanted you to know that much for now. I’m going to talk to Marcus and set the record straight with him. I tried before, but the message didn’t really get through,” Simon admitted.

Wille’s brow furrowed at that, a strong line of concern appearing between his eyebrows, “He’s not pressuring you or anything, right?”

“No...no. Not like that,” Simon tried to reassure him. “I mean, he’s persistent...that’s for sure, but I think he’s a nice guy. He just likes me more than I like him. We’re better off as friends if we can get to that point...” Simon finished, wondering out loud what might happen once he talked to Marcus.

Wille breathed another sigh of relief and nodded at Simon with the hint of a smile forming in the corners of his mouth. A warm feeling spread in Simon’s chest when he saw the relief run through Wille’s expression and the way he held his shoulders.

Simon cleared his throat and swallowed before he waded into trickier waters, “What I really wanted to talk to you about tonight was trying to understand more about your side of what happened with August and the video. We don’t necessarily need to get into all of it right now...but I know there’s a lot I probably don’t know. Before I decide what to do I guess I have some questions or feel like I should be caught up on how things happened...” Simon prodded, trying to keep anger and any lingering resentment he felt out of his voice.

Wille took another steadying breath before he began to nod and swept his eyes across Simon’s face. “Yeah, OK. That’s totally fair. I know we haven’t really talked about all of that. I have some things to explain, and I know I made choices that seemed right at the time, but I don’t want it to come across like excuses...I do see how and why you’re angry and hurt about how I handled things...” Wille admitted.

“Thanks,” Simon breathed, also relieved that Wille wasn’t getting defensive on this topic. “So I guess my first question is when did you find out that it was August? Did you know when you made the statement denying you were in the video?” Simon asked.

“No...no. I didn’t know then. I promise,” Wille said quickly.

Simon breathed out a sigh of relief again. It would hurt even more if Wille had known that long. “Okay, good...so when did you find out? How did you find out?” Simon pressed.

Wille took another steadying breath, “I found out the same day that I came to your house after making the statement...when you told me that you didn’t want to be a secret...the day that we broke up, or you ended things...I’m sorry; I don’t know what I should call it. I know we weren’t technically together, or...—” Wille stammered.

“Wille, it’s OK. I know we didn’t talk about it...but to me we were together,” Simon reassured, shrugging his shoulders as a faint blush appeared on his cheeks.

“OK...me too,” Wille nodded. “But umm...yeah, I was in my room after you broke things off with me, and Felice knocked on my door. I told her it wasn’t a good time to talk, but she said it was important. I could hear in her voice that it really was, so I let her inside. She told me that she knew who was behind the video—”

“How did she figure that out? Had August told her?” Simon pressed, finally able to connect some of these puzzle pieces.

“No,” Wille continued. “She actually figured it out because of dead pixels—” Wille answered, shaking his head still at the fact that Felice had even noticed them. “She showed me screenshots of the video and pointed out these marks...or dead pixels...these purple dots that were in the video if you zoomed in. And then she showed me the same purple dots in photos from August’s Instagram. It was the same dots...the same pattern...in multiple pics. She told me that she knew August had dropped his phone and that he must have damaged the camera,” Wille finished.

“Seriously?? How many times did she look at the video to figure that out?” Simon wondered aloud.

Wille shuddered, “Oh, god. I don’t even want to think about that...” Wille trailed off.

“I don’t either!” Simon exclaimed, his cheeks heating up just thinking about that. “OK...so that’s a big question answered...so what did you do?”

“Well, first I wanted to say that I wanted to tell you then. You’re the first person I wanted to tell...but we had just broken up, and I wasn’t sure if you’d speak to me at first. I felt like I had to find out more...do more...before coming to you with it,” Wille explained.

Simon took a moment to absorb that and nodded his head with understanding, “Yeah, OK. I get that. I probably wouldn’t have answered you, to be fair,” Simon admitted.

“Yeah...so after that I kept looking at the pics and decided to just confront August about it. I found him by himself working out in the gym, and I asked him ‘Why?!’ I screamed at him; I was so fucking angry,” Wille said, his voice dripping with disgust. “Erik had told me that I could trust August like a brother. He annoyed the shit out of me—even before this—but I never expected that he would do something this low. He had told me that I could always go to him if I had a problem...that I was among my peers at Hillerska...for fuck’s sake he had sworn to me that he was loyal to the monarchy the night he initiated me into their stupid secret society. If I had been able to trust anyone, it should have been him. But he couldn’t even look me in the eye...all he said was that he was ‘sorry’ and that he ‘didn’t know what I wanted him to say.’ It was pathetic, really,” Wille finished, disgust still clear in his features.

“Secret society?” Simon sneered. “I don’t even want to know whatever kind of elitist bullshit that is.”

“No, you don’t—honestly. It’s stupid,” Wille agreed. He continued, “I told August that he was no longer part of my family, and then I left. I called my mama after that...and umm, she already knew Simon...she knew for a couple of days, and she didn’t tell me,” Wille’s voice cracked, the emotion rising back up to the surface.

Understanding dawned on Simon's face. No wonder Wille and Felice seemed closer and Wille had been so angry at August the whole term. His heart was breaking in two imagining what Wille must have felt at that moment... Simon had ended things, August had betrayed him, and his mama had known but didn't even tell her own son. Simon winced just trying to put himself in Wille's shoes.

"She told me she didn't tell me because she knew how I would react... that there were 'no winners' if we made it public," Wille said with air quotes. "She said we'd said I wasn't in the video and that we were sticking to that story," Wille said bitterly, but he wasn't finished.

Simon swallowed thickly, bile rising in his throat. He felt sick to his stomach just imagining that conversation.

"I asked her why she wasn't punishing him... why she was protecting him... and she fucking told me that she was protecting *me*... that she was protecting our 'family, the monarchy, and our legacy' that... that..." Wille stammered, his breath coming out more raggedly now.

"Wille... it's OK—" Simon tried.

"No, please. Let me get this out—" Wille implored. Simon just nodded and gave Wille his attention.

"She told me that leaving it alone was 'the only thing that could give Erik's death any meaning,'" Wille spit. "I hung up on her, Simon... I couldn't even listen to her anymore," Wille said, hanging his head, but not before Simon saw a few tears slip down his cheeks.

Understanding washed through Simon as his nausea only intensified. *Erik*. Wille hadn't only lost Simon, been betrayed by August, been manipulated and neglected by his own mama (and where the fuck is his papa in all of this? Simon wondered), but Wille had also just lost his brother—the one person in his family who seemed to care about him. Simon's heart broke for the boy he loved all over again. "Wille... Wille. Can you please look at me?" Simon asked softly. Wille was shaking by that point, his shoulders moving up and down as his breath came out in ragged, uneven intervals.

"Wille... please..." Simon asked again, desperately wishing there wasn't a damn screen separating them.

"I'm so sorry, Simon. I'm just so sorry that I hurt you and that I didn't tell you right away..." Wille said, shaking his head, his eyes still lowered. "I... never should have trusted either of them—" Wille continued.

"Wille, stop," Simon said more forcefully, and Wille's eyes finally snapped up to meet his. "Wille... thank you for telling me all of this. So this was the night before the term ended? The night before you hugged me goodbye in front of everyone..." Simon asked, leaving '*The night before you told me you loved me*' unsaid.

"Yeah," Wille replied, his voice resigned and gaze lowered once more, his shoulders and head hung in shame.

Simon felt tears slip down his own cheeks seeing the truth of how much Wille had been carrying and how it had affected him. “Wille...—” Simon continued carefully. “I’m so sorry, Wille. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there...I’m sorry you must have felt so alone...I’m so sorry I’m not there now to hold you...” Simon confessed. *I’m so sorry I told you to ‘Have a nice Christmas,’ instead of telling you I love you back,* Simon said silently.

Wille’s eyes snapped up again with surprise and disbelief dawning on his face. “Simon...it’s my fault and my choices that pushed you away...I don’t deserve your compassion and understanding on this...” Wille argued, shaking his head.

“Wille, listen to me,” Simon said with authority in his voice. “You’re only part right...yes, your choices did contribute to me ending things, but I can separate my feelings and reasons for doing that from my empathy for you—imagining how alone and hurt you must have felt... Both can be true,” Simon asserted. “I was angry because you told me that we were in this together, and then the next moment Ayub was reading out a headline and summary of your interview saying that you had denied being in the video and that you had ‘chosen not to get involved in any emotional relationships’...I felt blindsided, Wille. And so hurt. I felt like what we had meant nothing to you, that you were rejecting me...rejecting all of it—that you regretted it, even,” Simon admitted, feeling the breath knocked out of him again as his heart clenched and tears prickled in his eyes.

“Simon, I...I’m so sorry. I obviously know that I denied being in the video after I told you I wouldn’t make a statement. But I also need you to know that everything that gets printed for articles like that one isn’t always words that came out of my mouth. In fact, they’re usually not. Even when they are, they’ve been written by a whole team of people who chose each word carefully based on what’s ‘best for the crown.’ Most of the time the things I have to say, or the words that get printed as if I said them, aren’t true at all. At least in the sense that they’re not usually how I feel or what I would choose to say if given a real choice...and that’s absolutely the case in this instance. Meeting you meant *everything* to me. You, and what we had, were what helped me get out of bed every day. You’re the whole reason I stopped asking to go back home. Do you remember when I asked you if I liked it here?” Wille asked.

“Yeah...at your initiation party,” Simon quickly replied.

“Yeah, when you didn’t answer my question and threw it right back at me,” Wille teased.

Simon smirked and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, ‘And your point?’

“Yeah, *that one*. I told you I liked it here because I was already so gone for you. I guess me running after you like a total loser and asking you to go outside with me didn’t give it away?” Wille asked, his face as bright as a tomato.

Simon giggled remembering how surprised he was when Wille grabbed his arm and mumbled something about going outside.

Simon was still smiling at the memory when he finally answered, “OK. Fair enough. I guess you’re right...I don’t know a lot about how statements like that are given and who writes what says what—It helps to be reminded how totally ‘gone for me’ you were,” he teased. “So what happened, then? You had told me you were going to talk to your mama but did you even

do that?” Simon asked, still wanting to get to the bottom of how Wille had gotten from the things he said in his room to the statements that were made.

Wille’s eyes snapped back up to meet his gaze. “Simon, I *did* talk to her; I swear. I told her that I wanted to be with you...that I wanted to live a normal life with you...it’s everything I wanted...that was never a lie, I promise. I told her that I didn’t want to say anything at all...but I can’t even tell you what it’s like when I talk to her. Everything gets so turned around, and she can be so dismissive of everything I’m feeling. No matter how sure I feel or how direct I am about what I want to do, she twists it all around to make me feel like I’m wrong...that what I want doesn’t matter...that I’m selfish and naïve for ever expecting my needs to matter above the crown’s image and legacy. Especially since...since...since I became Crown Prince,” Wille choked out.

Since Erik died, Simon silently added for him.

“She reminded me that I’m Crown Prince...and she said all this shit about us being young and feeling like ‘love is the most important thing in the world,’” Wille said with air quotes again, “She told me that if we couldn’t stand the pressure and attention on us after the video that it would be nothing like what would happen if I came out...that it would be like that for the rest of my life...that this was my only chance to deny it, and that I better take it...” Wille explained.

“No pressure—” Simon quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

Wille smirked and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right?!”

Simon let everything breathe and rest for a few minutes—fully trying to absorb what Wille’s mindset must have been like following that conversation. Simon was beginning to understand how small Wille’s world was...how much weight the boy he loved was carrying around at all times. Simon sighed, desperately wishing he could hug Wille right now and give him some comfort.

“If I could do it over I would do it differently, Simon. I hope you know that... At that moment I felt like I had to choose you or my family and Erik’s legacy. I didn’t even know about August yet, but I felt like it might get easier for you if people thought the video was you and some other random boy...not the next King of Sweden. I wanted to take it back as soon as I talked to you and realized what I had really done...as soon as I realized how much I hurt you. If I could do it over I would call you and tell you what she had said so we could reassess and decide together... I’m so sorry I took that choice away from you and blindsided you. Our argument today showed me that you were right... I did do the same thing she does to me...the same thing I hate,” Wille said shaking his head, his voice dripping with shame.

Simon blinked back more tears before he took a steadying breath and replied, “Thank you, Wille; I accept your apology. I truly have an easier time understanding some of the reasons you did what you did. It doesn’t mean I agree with it or can undo the hurt that it caused or the things that have happened since...but I can have more empathy for how you must have been feeling. This happened to both of us, and I’m so sorry that it was done by someone you thought you could trust...and that your mama protected anyone or anything before you. You deserve better, Wille,” Simon reminded him.

“Thank you, Simon. It's a relief to be able to tell you about this...I wish I had done it sooner, honestly,” Wille admitted.

“So...about August? I'm guessing your mama said nothing was going to happen to him?”

Wille's face twisted into a sneer. “Yeah; since I had said I wasn't in the video she said he wouldn't be punished. Because without admitting I was in it, she would have no reason...or no right to punish him. And I suspected that you would want to go to the police with the information, but I know that my mama and the Royal Court would do anything and everything to prevent it from getting out that I was involved. They'd get the best lawyers to defend August and do god knows what to keep my involvement out of it,” Wille explained.

“August kept texting me over the winter break trying to apologize, but I told him I was going to make him regret what he did. If the crown wasn't going to punish him, then *I* wanted to do it...in my own way. I know you thought I didn't tell you because I was trying to protect him, Simon, but protecting him from anything is the very last thing I want. I swear!” Wille said desperately.

This was all pieced together into a clearer picture now, Simon thought. “So all that stuff about third years eating first and Vincent becoming Prefect and Captain of the Rowing team...” Simon mused.

Wille was nodding, “Yeah. I basically have been pushing him and humiliating him when I've had the chance. I know this school and his position here mean everything to him...I wanted to take that away from him the way he took you away from me,” Wille admitted. “I know that's messed up, and even still that it's not enough considering what he did...but it's what I felt was possible given the Crown's position on all of it. But then I found out he's my backup. I told my mama that I wouldn't give the speech at the Jubilee if she didn't let you sing your song—”

Simon nearly choked, “Excuse me? You did what?”

“Yeah. I tried to use it as leverage, but then she told me August would give the speech if I didn't...and that the Royal Court didn't think I could handle the pressure or that I would abdicate, or not produce an heir, and that they needed to bring August into the fold now so it's not a weird transition...that I'm putting our whole government and legacy at stake by being a loose cannon,” Wille huffed.

“Jesus, Wille. Do you realize how strong you are?” Simon asked.

“I'm not... I should have done more,” Wille whispered, shaking his head.

“You've done what you could in a really difficult position, Wille. I see that better now,” Simon said softly.

“Thank you, Simon. My mama made me start seeing Boris this term—to control my emotional outbursts—but it has honestly been the best thing she's made me do, I think. He's helping me separate my duty from what I want...how I want to live. You're the first person

who made me think that I could live my own life, and he's been helping me see that too...it's why I came tonight to let you know about August being the backup," Wille explained.

"Right..." Simon continued, feeling the last few pieces click into place. "I have a lot to think about, Wille. I'm really glad we got to talk tonight, but it's a lot to absorb."

"Of course; take your time. I meant what I said earlier. You have to do what's best for you, Simon. You can tell me whenever you decide. I'm sure there's more to talk about another time, but I'm glad we've started..." Wille smiled.

"Me too, Wille. We should get some sleep," Simon prompted.

"OK. Goodnight, Simon. Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight, Wille."

Simon was sitting at a table with Sara, Wille, and Henry working on their project about the autobiographical novel, *Kris*. Well, Simon, Wille, and Sara were working...Henry was drawing pictures and doodling in his notebook. Wille was waving his pencil in the air, which caught Simon's attention. When he raised his eyes a bit higher they connected with Wille's honey-golden eyes. Wille smiled softly at him and Simon felt his stomach flip in response.

During last night's call with Wille it really felt like things had shifted. They hadn't yelled at one another or walked away from the tough conversation, and Simon had gotten a lot of questions answered for himself about what had happened with Wille and the interview, everything with August, etc. They still had more to talk about and decide about the future, but Simon was happy that they had turned some kind of corner, and hopefully, it was just the beginning.

Just then Simon's phone buzzed with a text from his mama, and he unlocked it to read the message.

Mama 🌻: Missing you! See you at five!

Simon looked over at Sara to make sure she was coming home with him after school. "You're not canceling tonight, are you? Mama is so glad you're coming home," Simon said.

"No, I'll be there," Sara reassured him.

Their teacher, Ms. Ramirez came over to check on their progress with the assignment. "How are you all doing?" she asked.

Surprisingly Henry was the first one to speak up, "Like this question, 'What is the dilemma of the book?' I just don't get it. Because she's head over heels in love with this girl... but she has never really spoken with her" Henry said dubiously, tapping his notebook for emphasis.

Simon tried to reign in his amusement, smiling softly as he looked between Henry and Wille. Simon couldn't help but notice how handsome Wille looked today. Simon had to admit that

Wille's shorter hair had really grown on him. When he first saw Wille at the beginning of the term party, it had been a shock to the system that Wille looked so much older, more princely, charismatic, even. Wille's hair didn't flop in his face the way it did before, but Simon still resisted the urge to run his fingers through it the way Wille still nervously did himself. But sitting there right now Wille looked so...sophisticated...and *hot*, Simon mused. But Simon was never going to forget how the first thing Wille blurted out to him at that party was, "I got a haircut!"

"Siv? The one Malin is in love with? Right," Ms. Ramirez confirmed.

"Malin is projecting everything onto Siv. That may be the reason she is in love with her. Because she can be exactly who Malin wants her to be," Sara posited.

And what do you think the dilemma is?" Ms. Ramirez probed.

Simon felt like he was starting to make connections for the book, so he attempted an answer. "That Malin was raised with strong Christian morals that... are hard to reconcile with her true feelings. Especially for Siv," Simon said, his eyes sweeping between Wille and Ms. Ramirez. Simon couldn't help but think about Wille having to reconcile his feelings for Simon with the expectations of the monarchy. Wille was constantly being reminded of the traditions he had to uphold, and his mama had seemingly tied Wille's worth and value to his cooperation in upholding them. Simon was beginning to understand how little room it gave Wille to live his life how he wanted.

"It makes you wish Malin could just ignore them. Her duties and notions about God are not just external. It's partly her fault," Wille admitted. Wille and Simon's eyes met, as they both thought about everything Wille had to do as the Crown Prince. Simon felt Wille's eyes on him, as they considered each others' words and the ways the themes of the book seemed to overlap with some of their own struggles.

Simon shrugged his shoulders and continued further, "She has been forced... to follow those rules. She can't just discard everything she's learned about right and wrong. She does want to change her life, because of what she's learning through her feelings for Siv. Not everything is bad. And we don't know what happened after the ending," Simon summarized. Wille had smiled at Simon with hope and vulnerability when Simon had said that 'not everything is bad,' and Simon thought back to their fight in the changing room where Simon had said that maybe he couldn't accept Wille's family and position. He had said it out of hurt and anger, and he had regretted it since. Simon's understanding of the book had really taken shape when he connected the themes of the book to a lot of what he and Wille were going through navigating their relationship through the systems and traditions of the monarchy. Simon was starting to understand Wille more, and as he and Wille shared soft glances across the table he felt that tiny flame flickering in his chest. It felt like they were understanding each other better, and he was totally gone for the way Wille was shyly smiling at him with the recognition that they had found that connection and clarity together.

Sara's response interrupted his thoughts like a cold bucket of water, "Well, she committed suicide."

“What? Where does it say that?” Henry asked.

“I mean Karin Boye. It’s autobiographical,” Sara explained.

“Okay,” Henry sheepishly replied.

“Good. You can use all of this in the presentation. Keep going,” Ms. Ramirez encouraged.

Simon’s eyes glanced across the room where he saw August leaning in the doorway talking to one of the boys on the rowing team, Magnus. Simon tried to control his facial expressions, but internally he was holding back disgust and rage because August was standing there sneering at him. It felt like August had gotten away with everything and was taunting them, not burdened or affected by anything he had done. It really made Simon’s blood boil. He wanted to walk over there and give August a piece of his mind, but he felt like he had to bide his time until he decided what he was going to do with the knowledge that it was August who filmed the video. It was truly hard to reconcile his need for justice with his desire to unburden the sensitive soul across from him.

“Uno, Dos, Tres...” Linda said as she snapped a picture of Simon and Sara.

The fake smile that Simon had put on for the photo quickly disappeared from his face. Simon had been looking forward to this dinner since the three of them had so little time together as a family since Sara moved into Manor House. Even though he and Sara were OK after the Micke stuff, it still felt like their relationship had changed. Simon hadn’t been able to put his finger on the cause, other than Sara integrating more into Hillerska, but he was glad she had friends and didn’t need Simon in the same way – even if he missed her. Simon just felt like his head was so scrambled about August and whether or not reporting him was the right thing.

“The most beautiful children in the world. Let’s take a selfie as well,” Linda said as she leaned between Simon and Sara and snapped another photo.

“You’re both just so cute. Look. My beautiful kids who are no longer kids. You’re adults now,” Linda continued talking excitedly.

Simon was still so lost in his thoughts, feeling so weighed down by the potential implications of either choice involving August.

“Mom, remember that if you meet the Queen, you have to say ‘Your Highness,’” Sara reminded Linda with seriousness.

Simon got up from his seat and walked into the kitchen to grab a few things for their meal. He paused for a moment to lean on the counter and try to compose himself but hearing Sara and Linda prattle on in the other room about etiquette and the queen was getting under his skin.

“Your Highness,” Linda repeated.

“No, no, no. I mean ‘Your Majesty. ‘Majesty,’” Sara corrected herself.

“Do I do this with my hand?” Linda asked.

“No, No.”

“Do I kiss her hand?”

“No, no.”

Simon couldn’t listen to them carry on about etiquette for another second, so he interrupted. “I won’t be singing the solo, Mama. So you don’t even have to come,” Simon called from the kitchen.

“What? Of course, I’ll come see you. And I won’t embarrass you if I meet the Queen,” Linda assured Simon.

“Oh, right. I saw Marcus’ mom the other day. She sends her regards,” Linda said excitedly.

Simon glanced over his shoulder to look at her, realizing that he hadn’t told her what was going on with him in the Marcus department...but to be honest he hadn’t really told her much about them being together in the first place. He didn’t think he and Marcus were at that stage, but Simon hadn’t accounted for the fact that their moms were friends.

“Listen, she was telling me that she’s crazy about you. She started telling me how happy she is that you two are together,” Linda said as she walked into the kitchen to talk to Simon more directly.

Simon held back the urge to roll his eyes or snap at his mama when he knew she was just trying to be supportive, but Marcus was really the very last thing he wanted to talk about tonight.

“She was telling me how cute you guys are. Excited that you met... her son,” Linda continued, not picking up on Simon’s body language. Simon sighed and sat back down at the table.

“Are you okay?” Sara said with concern, leaning toward Simon.

Simon nodded out of habit, but then he shrugged knowing he didn’t really feel okay right now.

Linda sat back down at the table with a proud and happy smile on her face as she reached toward Simon. “And I, of course... very much agree with her. I’m so, so proud of you guys,” Linda beamed at her children.

“I know who posted the video of me and Wille,” Simon said, not able to put on a false front through the whole meal.

His admission hung in silence for a beat or two, but Simon wasn’t surprised that his mama and Sara would need a few moments to absorb the information.

“Yeah?” Linda asked with concern.

Simon gently nodded, “It was August,” he admitted, devoid of emotion by now because he was so weighed down by the gravity of this decision and how it might change so much.

“Okay. But that’s a good thing, right? That you know who did it? Did you tell the school?” Linda asked.

Simon shook his head, no, but before he knew it the words came tumbling out of his mouth. “No, but I was going to go to the police,” Simon declared.

“Yes, of course. We have to do that,” Linda said with concern and empathy clear in her expression. Linda reached across the table and gently gripped Simon’s arm to give him comfort and help steady him. Simon reached out to grip her arm as well, appreciating the comfort and support the gesture showed. He couldn’t get through this without his mama and Sara on his side.

Simon didn’t have an appetite anymore.

Simon grabbed his phone and sat down on his bed. They had tried to enjoy their time together for the family dinner, but the mood was somber after he told them about August. Sara was really quiet after Simon told them, but Simon wasn’t sure why. He used to be able to know what Sara was thinking and feeling without having to ask her, but that really wasn’t the kind of relationship they had any more. The night that he saw August in the stables talking with Sara he didn’t know what to think. Sara denied that they were friends, but why else would August be in the stables talking to Sara at that time of night? August didn’t ride horses, as far as Simon knew, and they didn’t have classes together, so why would they be interacting? Simon shook his head trying to disrupt the spiral he had started. He had a nagging feeling that there was more going on between Sara and August than he thought, and it was really hard to reconcile that possibility now that Simon knew August was behind the video. Even though Sara didn’t know about the video until tonight, she knew how shitty August had been to Simon, calling him Sosse and trying to exclude them from the Parents’ Day luncheon. She didn’t know about Simon selling him the alcohol, the drugs, or everything that happened when Simon tried to get his money back, though. Regardless, why would Sara want to be friends with a guy like August of all people? August had even tried to buy her ADHD meds off of her – medication that Sara needed – when August just wanted to get high off them or something. Simon scoffed at the thought that even now August was *still* tainting the good things in his life—the relationships with the people who were most important to him. Simon didn’t want him to have that kind of power in his life.

Simon didn’t want August to get away with what he had done to him and Wille. He wanted everyone to know how low August had sunk, but most of all Simon just wanted justice. That video had ripped him and Wille apart—and it might still, despite the healing they’d had. No matter what, Simon’s name, his face...his body would always be tied to that damn video. Having that memory—Simon’s first time—be tainted by that video made Simon want to cry every time he thought about it. That moment had meant everything to him, but August had turned it into something dirty, something to be ashamed of...and for what? As far as Simon

was concerned, he had been the sole person to publicly suffer for the video, and he wanted that to change—even if August had the best defense possible when charged with his crimes. At least people would know what August had done.

Simon had been shocked that Wille was willing to give up the throne to be with him...he really was. Simon knew that Wille was struggling in his role as Crown Prince, but he didn't want him to decide that until he knew for sure that it was the right choice. They were still so young, and even though Simon desperately wanted to work things out with Wille, he didn't know if they'd make it for the long haul. If Wille was going to abdicate, Simon wanted him to do it for himself—when he knows that he was choosing a path that makes sense for him and his future. Simon couldn't bear the weight that Wille abdicating would put on his shoulders if he did it to be with him, because he never wanted Wille to regret his decision, or worse, resent Simon.

On top of everything else, Simon didn't want Wille to be stuck in the role if August would no longer be considered as his backup due to the charges about the video, but he didn't want August to be King even more. Simon had to believe there would be other options for Wille that didn't involve stepping aside for August.

Simon had made quite a few bad decisions during his time at Hillerska so far—decisions that he regretted and is ashamed of—because his mama raised him to be better than this. Simon had seen people get away with things they shouldn't, people blamed for things they didn't do, people who had broken rules and pushed limits because they could, and people hazed and embarrassed for stupid initiations and discriminatory and exclusive secret societies. Someone had to *do the right thing* for once, and if that had to be Simon, then so be it. Simon didn't want another bad choice on his conscience—especially to protect August of all people. Simon was raised to be better than that, and it was important to him that he started acting like it. He wanted to be worthy of his mama's pride.

Simon hoped that Wille would understand and that they would keep talking about where this left them. Simon had tried to stay away from Wille and move on, but it had only brought him more pain. This time he wanted to try fighting for them, and he hoped that Wille would stay by his side and fight along with him. Each of them was individually strong and resilient, but they were stronger together.

Simon turned his key in his locker to grab what he needed for his next class, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Wille slouched in a chair at a table outside the classroom. They had their presentation today, so Simon hoped Wille was OK. They had texted each other a little yesterday, but mostly just some random things. Simon took a deep breath and walked toward the table where Wille was sitting. Simon didn't want to keep Wille wondering what he had decided to do about August.

“Hey,” Simon started.

“Hey,” Wille said, straightening his posture.

Simon's nerves were getting the best of him, so he struggled to make eye contact. Wille already looked so sad, and Simon didn't want to add to that. But he had to do this.

"I thought about what you said, but I have to file a report. I can't let August get away with it," Simon let out, trying to be as direct about everything as possible.

"But—" Wille started, his eyes widening. But just then they were interrupted as both Sara and Henry approached the table.

"Okay, whose computer do we use?" Sara asked, sitting down in an empty seat.

"Here's the deal. I'm not answering follow-up questions. I'm only saying what I've written out in my book. Because I've hardly read the book. Yes? Okay, good. You guys have this under control. See you later," Henry said as he stood near the table. As quickly as he appeared he walked away again, not waiting for his group members to respond.

Simon and Wille made eye contact across the table, both still thinking about what Simon had started to tell him before they were interrupted. The color had drained from Wille's face, and he was staring down at the table now with a sobered expression on his face.

"Okay. Should we go through everything one last time, or...? Sara tried.

"I don't feel so good. I have to..." Wille said as he gestured his head away from them and got up to leave. He quickly walked away without another word or glance toward Simon, so Simon felt his stomach drop like a stone.

That hadn't gone at all how he hoped it would. He wanted to be able to explain himself more. He needed Wille to understand why that was his choice. Wille had told Simon that he had to do what was best for him...did he mean it? Was he coming back? Was he going to miss the presentation?

Simon glanced at his sister, who looked as confused as he felt, but Simon had to push those feelings aside right now. He didn't have the time to let all his emotions come spilling out, and he couldn't afford to take a bad grade on this presentation either. But Simon couldn't help but just feel dread and fear rising within him. Would he and Wille get through this? Would this break them?

Simon kept nervously looking toward the door to their classroom, desperately hoping that Wille was going to come back any second. They hadn't presented yet, but they would be any minute. Simon decided to text Wille, but it might not do any good.

Simon: "Where are you?"

Simon: "Are you mad at me?"

Simon was sitting at lunch blankly staring at the table in front of him. They had done their presentation without Wille there. Simon was so worried about Wille and whether he was OK that he couldn't even bother to care whether they'd get a good grade on the presentation or not. Simon had gone on autopilot and couldn't even be sure what he had said during it. Both Sara and Henry seemed happy with it, though, so maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought—aside from Wille missing it. Simon didn't have an appetite anymore, so his lunch sat before him pretty much untouched. Wille wasn't here at lunch either, so Simon decided he'd go to his room after this and find out for himself if he was OK. Wille still hadn't answered his text messages, so he'd have to go to him.

Simon stood up from the table and cleaned up his plate, pretending he didn't hear Henry call out to him as he was leaving the room. Simon couldn't wait for another second to check on Wille, so he started walking toward his room. He wasn't sure exactly what he expected to find, but he was trying to prepare himself for any number of scenarios. As Simon walked down the hall he saw that Wille didn't have security outside his door anymore. Maybe they were on a break? Or did he really no longer have security posted outside his door? Simon didn't know since he hadn't been to Wille's room since that day he said goodbye to Wille before he left to give his interview at the castle. Simon shook that memory away, not wanting to think about the promises Wille had made that day. A lot had happened since then, and Simon just wanted to focus on how things were right now. He needed Wille to know that Simon choosing to report August wasn't him rejecting Wille.

Simon raised his left fist and knocked on Wille's door, hoping that he and Wille could keep their heads about them and have a conversation as calm as the one they'd had the other night on their video call. Simon just needed to clear the air as soon as possible; not communicating hadn't served them well so far, so he didn't want to leave room for more misunderstandings.

"Who is it?" Wille called out.

"Simon," he answered.

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